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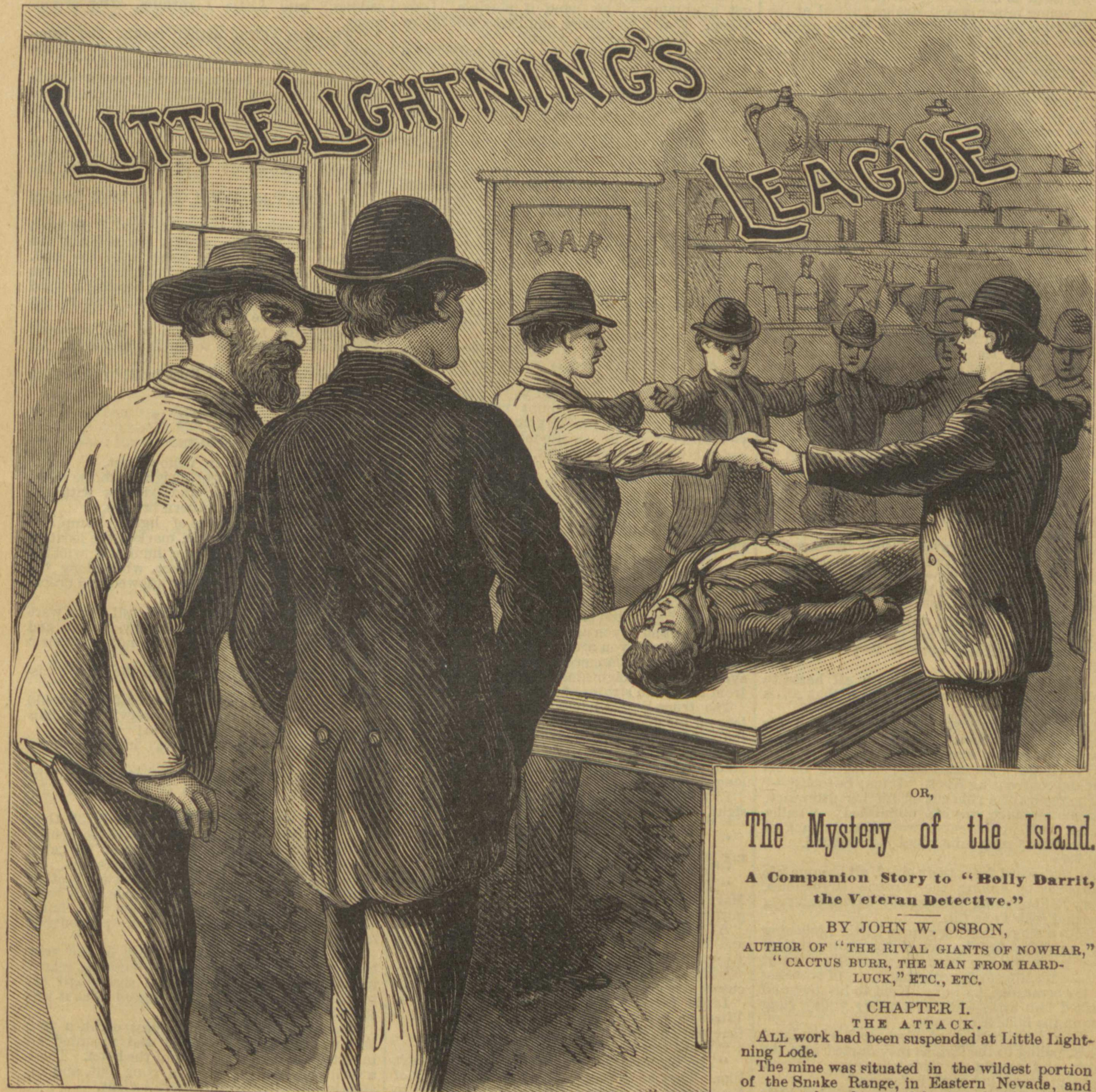
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OR,

The Mystery of the Island.

A Companion Story to "Bolly Darrit,
the Veteran Detective."

BY JOHN W. OSBON,
AUTHOR OF "THE RIVAL GIANTS OF NOWHAR,"
"CACTUS BURR, THE MAN FROM HARD-
LUCK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE ATTACK.

ALL work had been suspended at Little Lightning Lode.

The mine was situated in the wildest portion of the Snake Range, in Eastern Nevada, and was owned and worked by ten dashing young fellows known as the Prairie Invincibles.

"IT IS A COMPACT—A LEAGUE, THE INVINCIBLES IS MAKIN'," MUTTERED BOLLY DARBIT.

Little Lightning's League.

The recognized head of this band, or "company," was David Kane—better known as "Little Lightning"—a dark-eyed, dark-haired youth just at the threshold of vigorous manhood.

The second in command was David's twin-brother, Kent, a trim, fine-looking lad, with blue eyes, and light-brown hair.

The noon-hour was just past. Everything about the little silver camp had been made snug, and the ten young miners, in holiday attire, were lounging about the narrow ledge, upon which their corral and cabin had been built.

In a rustic seat near the doorway, sat two of their number—superbly-robust, bright-eyed fellows, faultlessly attired, and, just then, objects of special interest to their comrades. It would have required no second glance to determine that they were the Kane brothers—Little Lightning and Kent.

Though silent, both looked happy, and just a trifle nervous. Evidently an ordeal of some sort, more or less trying, was near at hand.

"Kent," exclaimed Little Lightning, suddenly breaking the long silence between them, "Kent, rouse up! Throw a little life into that motionless carcass and silent tongue of yours! Do you know, every mother's son of the Invincibles is staring at us as if doubting our sanity!"

The young miner stared straight ahead at the steep hillside opposite the cabin, a tender glow in his half-closed blue eyes.

"No doubt of it!" he returned, dreamily. "I don't blame 'em, either."

"Nor do I," averred David, laughingly. "In fact, I feel charitably inclined toward the whole world—the Brotherhood of Fortune included!"

Kent started, and his expression changed, the smile dying on his lips, and the light in his eyes turning to a peculiar sparkle.

"I can't say that, Davy," he exclaimed, abruptly, as he turned his head to meet his brother's gaze. "I don't believe we've seen the last of those fellows yet! I can't rid myself of the idea that they are simply biding their time—that when they strike, the blow will be a heavy one!"

"It is just possible that you are right," admitted Little Lightning, his tones suddenly becoming grave. "At all events, they are at large—have baffled every effort looking to their capture. Captain Marks has in many respects proved an abler leader than Bishop Hearne!"

"True!" and Kent nodded sharply. "And we must not forget that Major Menace, Gideon Grim, and 'Red' Pepper are also at large. A coalition would make the band more dangerous than ever."

"But Orndare has taken every precaution."

"And yet he might be caught off his guard."

"Kent, you are growing morbid!"

"No, Davy, not that. The heaviest strokes come unawares; when the cup of happiness is nearest full, Fate shows itself and the bowl is shattered."

Little Lightning's gravity visibly increased.

"We'll take every precaution," he averred. "If the Brotherhood shows its hand, we'll try to do better than we did before; we'll hound 'em down if it takes a month!"

"Exactly! When the mischief is done, it will be too late for anything but revenge, however."

"Well, then, Kent, what is it you have to suggest?"

"Simply, that we proceed with all haste to Yellow Dust. I have a premonition that all is not right there!"

Little Lightning stared quizzically at his brother's somber face. Then a shade of anxiety crept into his own visage.

"We'll go!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet and confronting Kent. "It may be foolish—"

The report of a rifle cut off further utterance, and the sentence was left unfinished. A bullet buried itself in the cabin wall directly back of the seat the young miner had just vacated.

"Tree!"

At that word from their chief, all became life and activity among the Prairie Invincibles, every lad bounding toward the cabin, securing tree and rock as he ran.

With a single fleeting glance Little Lightning had read the full import of the shot—realized that it was nothing short of a dastardly attempt to take his life; and, with that note of warning to his comrades, he pulled Kent to his feet and pushed him aside—just as a heavy volley rung out on the hillside opposite.

"The Brotherhood of Fortune!" ejaculated Kent, paling to the lips, as they darted into the cabin and caught up their weapons. "Pards, we've got some hot work before us!"

"An illegal toime intoirely!" echoed a little young Celt, just behind him.

"But confoundedly inopportune!" Little Lightning added. "Close the doors and windows, lads, and take to the loopholes. We must drive these fellows off as quickly as possible."

"Kent, keep your eye on the corral. We may have to make a run for it. We are going to Yellow Dust to-night if we have to ride over Captain Marks and his band!"

A sort of stifled cheer greeted the sturdy declaration, and then the young rangers quietly settled down to the business in hand.

For upward of two hours, a desultory fire was kept up by the mysterious attacking party, with an occasional return shot from the besieged Invincibles. Then a man bearing a white flag stepped out from the shelter of a huge boulder, half-way up the hill, and strode boldly toward the cabin.

"A flag of truce—that's richness!" exclaimed Little Lightning, his dark eyes flashing fire.

"Be jabers! it's a notion Oi hev to pepper 'im wan!" the Celt cried, fondling his rifle. "A flag av thrice, indade! Fw'at's he take us fur—a loonathic 'saylum'?"

"Easy, Pat!" cautioned Little Lightning. "A dose of cold lead would serve him just right, no doubt; but, in a case of this kind, it is wisdom to meet the enemy half-way in his game—to get a glimpse of his hand if possible. Look sharp. Watch the others, and leave this fellow to me. We may score a point."

At that moment the truce-bearer halted at a distance of not more than fifty yards from the cabin.

"Hello! hello!" he hailed, sharply.

"Hello!" returned Little Lightning. "What do you want?"

"A talk—a chainte ter settle ther leetle p'int bechuxt us by argyments."

"The logic of lead is good enough for us!"

"Don't ye be too sure ov that," the desperado returned, sagely shaking his head. "My pards aire a bad lot ter buck ag'in', I kin tell ye."

"Then, too, you galoots hev jumped our claim, an' es et is es good a one es kin be skeered up in ther hull deestrick, why, et's only natteral that we sh'u'd stan' right up ter ther rack as long es a man kin hold onto a we'pon. An' that's the kind ov red-shirts we aire—you bet! Ef ye ain't a pack ov dirty kiotes, send yer chief out fer a talk, an' act like men hed orter act."

Little Lightning uttered a contemptuous laugh.

"And if we don't comply with your request—what then?" he asked.

"Wal, I reckon ye'll find ye've played ther durn fool," was the prompt reply. "Ther property is ounr, an' we're goin' ter hev et. Ef ye refuse ter act like white men we'll jest keep under kiver an' starve ye out. Not a man ov ye shell escape! So, what say?"

"Just this: Your claim to this mine is a trumped-up excuse to cover the wholesale massacre you attempted awhile ago. This property, as you well know, is ours, and is on record as such.

"Honest men, fighting for their rights, do not hide their faces behind masks, nor adopt the methods of assassins. Go back to your Brotherhood of Fortune, Captain Marks. Your miserable subterfuge is too transparent to deceive anyone. Go! and if you are not under cover at the end of a minute you are a dead man!"

There was a dangerous glitter in the dark eyes of Little Lightning, and the words came from his lips in strains of deadly earnestness.

The truce-bearer paused only long enough to tear off his mask and shake his clinched hand at the cabin, then turned, and with long strides hastened up the hill, quickly disappearing behind a growth of bushes at the outer edge of a long terrace.

Little Lightning watched the fellow out of sight, and then turned to Kent.

"You saw that face?" he asked.

"I did," was the low-voiced reply. "Davy, my premonition was a true one!"

"To a certain extent—yes."

"No, true to the letter, I fear. Captain Marks has not made this attack without a deep purpose."

At that juncture a sturdy lad at the opposite end of the cabin hailed the chief of the young miners, saying, in a quick, sharp tone:

"Hyar, Davy—at a double-quick! Them cusses aire makin' a move too deep fer me!"

Little Lightning hurried across the cabin. When he rejoined Kent, five minutes later, his face wore a perturbed look.

"What was it, Davy?"

"The Brotherhood are making a move I don't like. They have vacated the hillside by way of the terrace. I suspect their objective point to be Yellow Dust," Little Lightning replied.

"Leaving us to believe that we are in a state of siege?"

"Yes; their departure was cautiously taken, and naught but Lyon's alertness spoiled the cunning scheme. Open the corral door, Kent! Boys, see that your weapons are in trim, and tighten saddle-girths. There's a ride before you that may try your nerve!"

Silently, with the precision of trained soldiers, the lads obeyed the commands. The cabin door communicating with the corral was then secured, and the corral gate thrown open.

Forth rode the brave young cohort, Little Lightning and Kent taking the lead.

The tortuous descent from the level of the little plateau to the pass, three hundred yards below, was quickly made. Turning to the eastward, the Invincibles urged their horses into an easy gallop.

Perhaps a thousand yards had been thus traversed, when Little Lightning suddenly halted.

"Here's the point at which they left their horses," he announced, as he sprung from the saddle. "Here, Pat—you're an expert in such matters; help me read this trail."

"Begorra, sor, Oi'm yer b'y!" cried the Celt, dismounting with alacrity.

Patiently the two bent to their task.

"Fifteen horses—probably two with empty saddles," said Little Lightning, after a moment.

"Yis, sor! Oi'm afther makin' the same count," Pat responded. "They left two av the dirthy devils on the hill beyant, Oi reckon!"

When the two had remounted, the cavalcade again set forward, exercising due precaution to avoid an ambuscade. At the expiration of an hour, the lower end of the pass was reached, and there it was found that the Brotherhood of Fortune had swerved to the north, as if to avoid the trail leading into Yellow Dust from the south.

The Invincibles halted, and a brief council was held.

"It will never do to lose the trail," declared Little Lightning, after a pithy discussion of the question. "You, Bobby Lyon, take the lead. Push on after the Brotherhood, and hole the varlets if you can. If they are heading toward Yellow Dust, as I suspect, do your best to cut them off from the camp."

Bobby Lyon touched spurs to his horse and dashed away, with the seven Invincibles at his heels.

"Now for the Yellow Dust trail!" cried Kent to Little Lightning.

CHAPTER II.

"STOLEN!"

"TWAS a gala night in Yellow Dust.

A fair September night, bright with the sheen of a full round moon, and odorous with the sweet freight of soft southern breezes.

The camp was a blaze of light. Lamp and lantern, candle and torch, marked the location of each habitation, from the humblest wickiup to the most imposing structure, while along the line of the one winding street glowed and crackled a half-score bonfires.

As to the silver-seekers, out in full force were they, for the most part freshly-shaven and dressed in their best, but with not a weapon visible.

It was to be a night notable in the camp's history.

Eight o'clock, precisely; in a half-hour would be performed the first marriage-service in Yellow Dust—a double wedding, at that!

Little wonder the camp was indulging in a "blow-out!"

Then, too, it was to be no ordinary affair, but in both cases a union of beauty and chivalry.

Not only were Rachel Carson and Millie Ornade beautiful girls, but they were so gentle, and true, that the toughest denizen of the camp was avowedly the better for their presence.

And, as for David Kane, and his twin brother Kent, of the Little Lightning Lode, they were splendid looking fellows, generous to a fault, and of dauntless courage, and were pronounced favorites.

Half-way up the irregular street, in the very heart of the camp, a large frame building reared its ungainly proportions. The sign-board extending across its front announced that it was the "St. George Hotel."

Promptly at five minutes past eight, a tall, lank figure stepped forward and mounted an inverted starch-box in front of the hotel. There a shrill, penetrating whistle rung out, and instantly the noisy crowd became silent.

"Et's Ole Dan Rackhoss, ther marshal," ex-

plained a miner, to an inquisitive stranger.
"Jes' lis'en—"

"Gentlemen," began Rackhoss, at that moment, with a grandiloquent flourish, "ther time fer action hes arrove; ther event ov ther day is at hand. Ef—"

A wild outburst of cheers checked the orator. When the din had subsided, he continued:

"Ef ye think that arter ye git that ye kin hold yer jaw, keep quiet, keep yer paws off'n things, an', in fact, behave ginerally es gentlemen hed orter behave on sich condemned sublime occasions, why, we'll now fall in an' march ter ther residence ov Colonel Orndare an' tend ther weddin'. What say?"

A roar of assent went up from the crowd.

"Wait!" thundered Old Dan, sawing the air frantically, in an effort to make himself heard. "Jes' one thing more: Ther galoot that fergits his promise will settle with me!"

Rackhoss started sharply as he uttered the last word. A streak of fire had shot skyward from the dark hillside across the narrow valley.

"A rocket—a signal!" he muttered, his hands dropping to his belt. "Thar's devilmint afoot! Little Lightnin' must know—"

The report of a revolver rung out, directly behind him, and, uttering a scream of pain, he staggered forward, gamely striving to keep his feet, then pitched headfirst from the box.

Instantly, the crowd was plunged into a very Babel of confusion, and surged toward the fallen official, breathing threats of vengeance against his slayer.

Simultaneously, the sounds of a fierce scuffle arose directly in front of the hotel. The assassin had been spotted.

He was none other than the inquisitive stranger.

Pressed to the wall, his still smoking revolver stricken from his hand, he struggled gamely, desperately, but to no purpose. He was buffeted to and fro by the strong arms of the men of Yellow Dust until he hung limp and senseless in their hands.

"What's the trouble, boys?"

The even-toned query came from a short, stout man, slightly past middle age, wearing a dark, slouched hat and black clothing. His eyes were blue, mild and gentle, and his face fresh and full even—boyish.

"Darrit, by Brigham!" ejaculated a miner, stepping back a pace.

It was indeed Bolly Darrit, the Veteran Detective.

"Murder, may'r—murder!" another replied, in turn giving way to the redoubtable detective. "This galoot we've got hyar tried a snap-shot at Ole Dan Rackhoss, an' I reckon he fixed him, too!"

Bolly Darrit was staggered.

"Killed Dan, you say?" he exclaimed, as if doubting his ears. "Where have you taken him?"

"He— Thar—they're takin' him inter ther hotel," and the miner pointed to four men at that moment pushing toward the doorway of the hostelry with Rackhoss in their arms.

"Hold on to your man, boys! I'll be back in a moment. Remember, I want him *alive!*"

Darrit elbowed his way through the throng and into the bar-room of the hotel.

That popular resort, naturally enough, was packed; but the men of Yellow Dust parted right and left before the detective, and, in a half-minute, he was bending over the body of the old marshal.

Rackhoss had been placed upon a table, and a lamp hanging directly above him brought his grizzled face into strong relief. White and ghastly it looked in the garish light—so rigid and deathlike that Bolly Darrit uttered a groan.

"He's dead, boys—just as dead as a man can be!" he declared, sadly. "All we can do—"

A sudden, a mighty uproar, in the street of the camp, barred further utterance—a wild outburst of yells and curses, the heavy crash of firearms, the dull thunder of a troop of madly-riding horsemen, a ringing shout of triumph—just a breath of absolute quiet, then, in stentorian tones:

"Fire—fire—fire!"

The dread word rung throughout the almost defenseless camp, carrying with it a chill of terror. Men rushed to and fro, for the moment absolutely bereft of reason, while along the rough street glowed and crackled a dozen incipient conflagrations—the lawless work of now fast-departing riders.

Bolly Darrit was among the first of those within the St. George to reach the street. A glance showed him that the prisoner was missing—a second, that the camp itself was in imminent

danger; but coolly, he rallied the men of Yellow Dust, and in an incredibly short time squad after squad, organized and instructed, hurried in the direction of the burning buildings, until the detective alone remained.

He had turned to re-enter the hotel, when a hand dropped heavily upon his shoulder.

Darrit started, and, with revolver half-drawn, faced about.

Confronting him, his black eyes glowing luridly, his face drawn and haggard, stood James Orndare, of the Silver-Streak Mine.

"Good heavens, colonel!—you here! What has gone wrong? It is time for the wedding!" ejaculated the detective, paling.

"Wedding?" iterated the mine-owner, hoarsely. "Man, there will be no wedding this night! That devil's cohort, the Brotherhood of Fortune, has at last accomplished its mission of revenge! *My daughter and Miss Carson have been stolen!*"

CHAPTER III.

MENACE AND HIS MEN.

AN hour before sunset, one of strong vision, standing in the doorway of the St. George Hotel, might have seen perched at the outer edge of a terrace in the face of the great hill opposite, a man—a tall, trimly-built, athlete fellow, roughly garbed, and provided with a spy-glass, through which he was narrowly scanning the camp.

This spy was a handsome man, at first glance. His face was almost perfect in feature; his eyes were a brilliant dark-blue, his neatly-trimmed hair and mustache black and silken.

But a certain bold, evil look, a peculiar death-like whiteness of skin, and a livid X-shaped scar beneath one eye, combined to set at naught the first impression.

The man was bad—thoroughly bad, and his presence on the terrace was portentous of evil to Yellow Dust.

"The fools! Can they have forgotten the Brotherhood of Fortune?" he exclaimed, as he lowered the glass for a moment. "They have thrown precaution to the winds! The camp will be defenseless long ere midnight, and but for the master-stroke we have planned they should feel the weight of Major Menace's hand!"

"That point settled, now for a searching scrutiny of Orndare's dove-cote and its surroundings! The gayety in camp may mask a heavy battery there. Those accursed ex-prairie vagrants, Little Lightning and his brother, are artful—deuced artful, and as wary as the oldest fox in these hills. To catch them napping would be glory enough for one lifetime!"

The spy leisurely turned his glass upon the really elegant cottage of Orndare, which stood surrounded with shrubbery in the midst of a grove near the center of a beautiful little plateau about four hundred yards north of the camp.

"Nothing—absolutely nothing!" he muttered, after a long and careful survey. "Our agents certainly have not been deceived."

Drawing back from the edge of the terrace, Major Menace uttered a sharp whistle.

The next minute a man stepped out from the edge of the timber and advanced across the open with quick, restless strides. At a point fifteen feet from the brink of the "bench," he dropped to his hands and knees and crept forward.

"Here is your station, Con," said the major, as the fellow halted beside him. "Orndare's house is in plain view. When a lantern swings in a circle in the open off to the left, set off a rocket. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, major," and Con repeated the instructions.

"After that," pursued Menace, "you are to remain perfectly quiet until assured that the boys are at work in the camp down there. Then vamose, taking due care, of course, to cover your trail."

"Taking to water as frequently as possible," the outlaw added, with a cunning smile.

"Exactly. Resort to every trick known to baffle pursuit. We must not fail. By these men of Yellow Dust my father was driven to his death, and through me his scheme of vengeance shall be consummated."

The dark eyes of the outlaw chief flashed wickedly as he spoke, and into his clear soft voice crept a hard, metallic ring.

Con glanced at him slyly.

"I don't think we shall fail," he declared. "In a scheme of this kind success in a great measure depends upon the leader—and I reckon you'll do!"

"Then, too, the boys must have a strong motive to insure their best efforts. Money wags everything in these days; and as this promises

to be a rich haul, you can just gamble that the boys will pull hard."

"Your supposition as to the financial part of the affair is certainly not far wrong," admitted Major Menace, laughing sharply. "As to the rest time will tell."

"Keep your eyes open, do your task well, and you shall not be forgotten."

"Oh, I feel easy on that score," Con hastened to say, and then the major turned and crept toward the timber, within which he soon disappeared.

Con winked knowingly, and uttered a sound akin to a chuckle.

"The old 'un was counted A1 as a desperate schemer, but I reckon the son discounts him," he thought, as he turned to his task. "Hearne never tackled such a job as this!"

"In the mean time, Major Menace had gained a narrow pathway leading around the hill. Striking into it, he walked rapidly for perhaps a half-mile, then turned aside and entered an extensive growth of young trees and bushes.

At a distance of fifty yards from the foot-path was a small open space, in which were picketed a number of horses, while lounging about, chatting and smoking, were a half-dozen men—reckless-looking fellows, roughly dressed, and armed *cap-a-pie*.

"It's boots and saddles, boys," answered Major Menace, as he glided into the shadowy glade. "The way is clear before us. Not a precaution has been taken. If Captain Marks has done his duty, we shall be miles away before a pursuing party can even be organized."

Silently, with scarcely so much as a word to express their satisfaction at the aspect of affairs, the men sprung to their feet and prepared to leave the glade. Within two minutes, they were in the saddle, each man wearing over his face a black crape mask.

Menace took the lead. Out of the thicket and along the mountain-side they rode, keeping well up in the timber, and describing a quarter-circle in their route. At dusk, they halted a few minutes to await the rising of the moon, then pushed forward again, at the same slow, cautious pace, until they had entered a pass leading away to the northward.

Then Menace drew rein and dismounted—an example that was at once followed by his men.

"Slow and easy, boys!" he cautioned.

"Orndare's house is not three hundred yards away!

"Is your lantern ready, Sulkan?"

"An' lighted, boss, ready ter turn on," was the low-voiced reply.

"Take charge of the horses, Tybo, and we'll to work. Make sure of your weapons, boys, and if we are forced to fight, fight like devils."

As he finished speaking, Major Menace moved forward, silently followed by the men in Indian-file.

It required but a moment to ascend to the plateau upon which stood Orndare's house, where, at a word from their chief, the daring band crouched behind the clumps of shrubbery dotting the level.

Despite the brilliant moonlight and the ruddy glow from scores of colored lanterns swinging in the trees, Menace coolly removed his mask and approached a small pavilion just east of the cottage.

A slight figure darted out to meet him.

"Dolores!"

"Manuel!—it is you!"

"It is I, girl. What have you to tell me?—good news, or bad?" and Menace drew the woman into the shadows at an angle of the pavilion.

She shivered, and her dark eyes looked pleadingly into the cold blue orbs of the outlaw.

"Manuel," she faltered, her hands dropping gently upon his arms; "I doubt you! Am I not your wife?"

"You are, my bonny Dolores," whispered Menace in reply, his coldness vanishing for the moment.

"Are you true to the vows we took before the good Padre Juarez?" the woman continued.

"Yes, jealous Dolores—true to them and to you, if to nothing else," he laughed. "This affair with the young ladies arises from motives of money and revenge—nothing more, nothing less."

"But they are beautiful—so very beautiful!" sighed the woman. "I fear for—"

"You are to go with us," interrupted Menace, impatiently. "Now tell me the exact state of affairs."

"The house is full of guests," began Dolores, her eyes brightening. "The young gentlemen have not arrived yet, although they were to have been here at sunset. The young ladies are

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alone, in the east parlor. When a light is placed in the window thus, you may know all is well. Bring up your men, I will open the window."

"Good!" Menace exclaimed, patting his wife's cheek tenderly, "You are the most consummate little outlaw in the Brotherhood!"

The face of Dolores flushed with pleasure. Impulsively she caught his hand and pressed it to her lips.

"Don't forget!" she warned, drawing back and shaking her finger at Menace.

The next moment she glided toward the house, while the major hastily made his way to the end of the plateau bordering the pass, where he quickly selected three men.

"Zeb, if we have trouble, you and Jim come up as quickly as possible," he said, as he turned to retrace his steps to the pavilion.

"Sulkan, make your way to the lower edge of the plateau, and at the hoot of an owl signal Con with your lantern."

Then, with two men at his heels, Menace hurried through the grove, arriving at the pavilion just as a lamp appeared in the window of the east parlor.

"Everything is all right, boys," he muttered, hurriedly, as the light suddenly disappeared. "Follow me."

Pausing only long enough to readjust his mask, Major Menace glided toward the house, closely followed by his satellites.

On their approach, the window was noiselessly opened, and Dolores Menace sprung out.

"They are there, both of them—drugged!" she exclaimed, in a penetrating whisper. "The doors of the room are locked; but make haste, for Orndare is growing restless."

"And the servants?" queried Menace.

"They, too, are unconscious—have been for twenty minutes."

"Bravo! Stand close, boys, and go straight for the horses when I hand out the girls."

As he uttered the last words, the outlaw chief vaulted lightly into the room.

Not so much as a glance did he vouchsafe his surroundings. Directly before him, in a great upholstered chair, lay the prizes he coveted—Rachel Carson and Millie Orndare—inert and helpless!

"Beautiful? Yes, as the fairy creatures of a dream!" he muttered, pausing just a breath of time, his cold blue eyes lighting up. "Were my true-hearted Dolores less beloved, her jealousy would be well-founded!"

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the light died out of his eyes, leaving them again as cold and hard as steel.

Gliding forward, he deftly lifted Millie Orndare from the depths of the chair, turned and crossed the room to the window, where he laid the senseless form in the arms of one of his waiting followers.

The next minute Rachel Carson suffered a like indignity, and the outlaw was alone in the apartment.

Drawing a neatly-folded sheet of paper from his pocket, he threw it upon a small table hard by, pinning it to the costly wood with the blade of his bowie.

"There!" he muttered; "let James Orndare and Lewis Carson know whose hand has struck the blow—that, though Bishop Hearne is dead, his vengeance lives!"

The next instant Menace was startled by a subdued rapping at the nearest door. Then, as the plotter stole noiselessly toward the open window:

"Rachel—Millie!"

"Orndare!" thought the major, his hands involuntarily clinching. "In another minute he will be through that door! It is high time we were away!"

Leaping to the ground, he was confronted by his wife.

"Dolores! you should have gone with the others!" he exclaimed.

"Manuel, my place is with you," she returned, simply.

Catching her by the arm, he led the way across the plateau, anon glancing back at the house, again noting with anxious ear the varying sounds coming up from the camp proper.

At the end of the level, Menace and his wife were joined by Zeb and Jim, the two outlaws who had remained behind.

"Signal Sulkan, one of you," said the chief, tersely. "We will await him here."

Craning his head forward, Zeb imitated the hooting of an owl. Scarcely had the sound died away when the little party caught a glimpse of Sulkan's lantern near the lower edge of the plateau, and, a moment later, the flash of a rocket against the dark background of the hill to the east of Yellow Dust.

"Things are working splendidly!" declared Menace, gleefully, rubbing his hands, as Sulkan came running up. "If Pepper—"

"Thet's him, now," interrupted Jim, as the report of a pistol came from the camp below. "Hark!"

A chorus of harsh, angry cries came up to the plateau.

"They've spotted him!" Menace grimly averred. "Cut for the horses! We must get away from here!"

The party hurried down into the pass, the major taking Dolores in his arms to facilitate the descent.

Tybo and the two men with the captives were mounted and waiting, and the new-comers lost no time in getting into the saddle, Menace taking his place at the head of the party, with Dolores at his side.

Then up the pass they spurred, two abreast.

A mile was quickly covered; then, with the abruptness of thought itself, Major Menace drew rein.

"Easy, boys!" he warned, lifting his trim white hand. "Look to your weapons. *We are not the only horsemen in this pass tonight!*"

Just before him was a broad belt of moonlight. Slipping the mask from his face, he deftly adjusted a neat-looking beard in its stead, then slowly rode forward to the center of the lighted space.

Then, just as he drew rein, forth from the gloom ahead spurred a horseman—a slender, wiry-looking youth, revolver in hand, halting face-to-face with the outlaw chief.

For a moment neither spoke. Both sat as motionless as statues. Eye met eye unflinchingly.

Then, swift as the lightning's flash, the hand of the youth swept upward and outward, clutching the false beard, tearing it away, and revealing the stern, strangely-white face of Major Menace.

At the same instant, the horses were forced back upon their haunches, while through the brooding silence of the pass rung the voice of the youth, crying:

"Forward, boys! every lad of ye! It's our quarry—that devil's cohort, the Brotherhood of Fortune!"

CHAPTER IV.

LITTLE LIGHTNING'S LEAGUE.

THAT Bolly Darrit was dismayed and sorely disturbed by Orndare's startling announcement, was apparent at a glance.

"Stolen!" he ejaculated, clinching his hands and staring hard at the mine-owner's ashen face; "stolen! and by that imp of Satan, Major Menace!"

"Exactly!—read that!" and Orndare thrust into the detective's hand a neatly-folded slip of paper.

"Confound it all, colonel!" gritted the veteran detective, as he eagerly opened the missive, "we've got to wipe out these devils, if we have to lick all Utah with 'em! Let's see—they say:

"MESSRS. JAMES ORNDARE AND LEWIS CARSON:—

"You are hereby notified that Miss Orndare and Miss Carson are at present the honored guests of the undersigned. You need have no fear as to their comfort and absolute safety. It is for you to decide the duration of their visit with us, with the assurance that, without strenuous and well-sustained objection on your part, it will certainly be a lengthy one.

"The media of communication are not all that the heart of fond parent could desire just yet, as we are at present located in an extremely isolated region—a spot, too, which a dozen men might easily hold against a thousand; but you may expect to hear from us again, and more definitely, within a few days.

THE BROTHERHOOD OF FORTUNE."

As he read the signature to the singular communication, Darrit uttered an oath.

"It's the old game," he cried. "It's been worked hundreds of times, but these blasted bandits have gotten the thing down to an extremely fine point. They've waited and watched, caught us unawares, and made a clean scare; but the game ain't out till it's played out, and—Bolly Darrit ain't dead yet!"

The veteran's eyes flashed vengeance.

"Nor hyar, 'uther, pard!" gritted a voice at his side, and, the next instant, the deathly-white face of Old Dan Rackhoss met his gaze. "I'm able fer a whack at 'em yet, I reckon!"

"Glory!" ejaculated Darrit, shrinking back just a trifle, then suddenly springing forward and grasping the old man's hands. "Blest if I didn't think you were a goner, Dan!"

"Only creased," Rackhoss quietly averred.

"Now to business—we've not a breath to lose," continued Darrit, turning abruptly to Orndare. "Where's Carson?"

"At the cottage, examining the grounds," the mine-owner replied, with ashen lips.

"And the boys?"

"David and Kent—they are not here yet."

"Trouble there, too, I'll bet!" muttered Darrit. "It's a precious plot—a master-plot! But, go on, Orndare—tell me all you know of the affair."

"That is very little. David and Kent were to have been at the cottage by sunset, but failed to arrive. We were all restless and uneasy, feeling that something out of the ordinary had happened. The girls were waiting in the east parlor. Some time between half-past seven and eight o'clock, I went to that room, knocked, called to the girls, and, receiving no response, tried the door, finding it locked. When it had been forced, I discovered that the room was empty, one window being open. Pinned to a table with a bowie-knife was the message from the Brotherhood.

"A hurried examination of the room revealed nothing more. I at once gave the alarm, and then, while Carson headed a search of the premises, hurried here to counsel with you. What can be done, Darrit?"

The mine-owner's voice, tremulous at first, had gradually become steady, and the question rung out incisively.

"You go home, colonel—and keep Carson there," the veteran replied, after a moment of deliberation. "Just leave this matter to me—I'll attend to it."

"But how shall you proceed?" persisted Orndare.

"Dispatch a messenger to Little Lightning Lode at once, then pick a score hard riders from the men of Yellow Dust, and strike sharp and quick. Ef the lads—"

"*Thar's ther boyees, now!*" interposed Rackhoss, pointing to the door, his grim visage lighting up as if by magic. "By smoke! they've b'en in action, too!"

True enough; Little Lightning and Kent at that juncture crossed the threshold of the bar-room, their elegant apparel disarranged and covered with dust and giving evidence of a fierce struggle.

Orndare impulsively sprung forward. He attempted to speak, but his voice failed him.

"We have heard all," averred Little Lightning, quietly. "Fray spare yourself the pain of a repetition, Mr. Orndare. Bolly, have the Invincibles put in their appearance?"

"Not as ther court knows on," the veteran declared, shaking his head dolefully.

"Singular!" muttered the young miner.

"They should have been here an hour ago!

"Mr. Orndare, I feel that a word of explanation is due you, precious as time is. Shortly after noon, we were fired upon from ambush, at the Lode, by the Brotherhood of Fortune. Luckily no one was hurt, and we retreated to the cabin, where we remained in a state of siege for over two hours, when the outlaws stealthily withdrew.

"Feeling assured, that Yellow Dust was their objective point, we at once set out in pursuit. A mile or so west of the old south trail, they turned abruptly to the north, and while Bob Lyons and the boys pushed on after them, Kent and myself hurried in this direction.

"Three miles down the trail, our horses were shot from under us by assassins in the brush, and, after a sharp hand-to-hand fight, we were compelled to take to the woods, and thus our arrival has been delayed."

Orndare extended a hand to each of the young miners.

"It is just as I feared," he said, simply.

"The condemned vandals have attempted to make a clean sweep," observed Darrit. "No doubt they have had spies in Yellow Dust for a month past.

"How soon can you be ready for the war-path, boys?"

"The moment we can secure horses," Little Lightning replied. "Luckily, we are fully armed. If the boys were only here with Rover, we could race down the gang by daylight."

"My stable is at your service," said Orndare.

"Good! In fifteen minutes we can be in the saddle. It is barely possible that we can lift the trail by moonlight, and if we can—"

The significance of the hiatus was not lost upon the little group. Silently they turned toward the door.

At that juncture the sharp clatter in the street announced the arrival of a party of horsemen.

An oath left Major Menace's lips as bold Bob Lyon plucked away the false beard, and as the young ranger's rallying cry rung through the

pass, the outlaw threw his horse back upon its haunches and leveled a revolver at the lad's head.

There was murder in the heart of Menace just then. Behind him, the camp of Yellow Dust was no doubt aroused to the highest pitch; before him, bold, self-reliant, ever ready for action, was a foe no less formidable than his own redoubtable clan—Little Lightning's Prairie Invincibles!

It required no words, no explanations to establish their identity. Intuitively, the major knew that Captain Marks had not been wholly successful—that the young rangers had eluded him, and were now in the pass, a barrier to the safety to be found only in speedy flight.

So, with stern purpose and fixed resolve, his cold blue eyes gleaming pitilessly—without the quiver of a nerve, his heart steeled against the faintest throb of pity—Major Menace raised his revolver, and fired.

A dual report rung out.

Uttering a cry of pain, the outlaw chief recoiled in his saddle, then suddenly rose in his stirrups, and flung his yet smoking weapon at his wary adversary.

The missile sped truer than had the bullet. A sharp crack followed, and Bob Lyon's revolver dropped from his hand.

Undismayed, the young ranger grasped his bowie, rapier-fashion, and urged his horse forward.

At the same instant, with a whoop and a cheer, into the lighted space spurred the Invincibles, charging straight into the shadows enveloping the outlaw band.

During the hurly-burly incident to the onward rush, Lyon and Major Menace were swept wide apart—the young ranger resuming his place at the head of the dashing squad, the outlaw chief wheeling and opening a sharp fire from the rear with his remaining revolver.

Then up from the gloom of the lower pass came a sound that brought a lurid glow to his eyes, and an exultant ring to his voice as he shouted:

"Steady, boys! Steady! Strike quick and hard! Captain Marks and his men are with us!"

High above the sharp rattle announcing the meeting of the unflinching foes rung the words, and Bobby Lyon, striking right and left, his gray eyes gleaming fearlessly, his handsome, boyish face aglow with dauntless courage, realized that the worst had come—that naught but a speedy and skillful retreat could save the Invincibles from the threatened death-trap.

"Fall back, boys!" he cried, the command creeping through his hard-set teeth in sharp, bitter accents. "Fall back! Lively! There they—".

"Oh, God, have mercy! Help, help!"

Clear and piercing rung that agonized shriek, cutting short Bob Lyon's hurried words, and driving the last vestige of color from his face—going straight to his loyal heart.

In the gloom before him—beyond the line of fierce-battling outlaws—struggling in the arms of a burly horseman, was a slender, white-robed form, and as if by inspiration he divined the truth.

The captive was Rachel Carson.

Instantly, the bold boy sent forth a thrilling rallying cry, struck spurs to his horse, and forced his way between two mounted outlaws, firing right and left the last two charges of his remaining revolver.

The space intervening between himself and the captive was quickly cleared. Taken at a disadvantage, hampered by the struggling girl, the outlaw readily yielded, slipping to the ground for safety's sake.

Just a breath, and then Rachel Carson was lifted to a perch before Lyon and given the support of his left arm.

"Rest easy, miss; you are with friends!" breathed the young ranger, encouragingly; then, clearly and distinctly:

"Close in, lads—ready for hot work! The devils are closing in upon us!"

"Faith, capt'in, dear, we're here—every mon av us," returned the rollicking Celt.

"Forward, in a body!—we must break through!" cried Lyon, his voice full and strong, though his heart sunk as he noted the solid phalanx the Brotherhood had formed. "Forward—forward!"

Obedient to the letter, with the suddenness and swiftness of a thunderbolt, the Invincibles charged down upon the rigid line, breaking through, though horses and men went down in the mad rush.

The last lad was clear. The ranks of the Invincibles were open and scattered—the inevitable

outcome of such an assault. Slightly in the rear, handicapped by the rescued captive, rode Bob Lyon, plying spur to his noble horse.

That his position was one of direst peril, was to be seen at a glance. To a man, the gallant band drew rein, to put him in the lead.

How fruitless that effort to secure the fruits of the dashing victory.

Forth from the line of the Brotherhood spurred a Centaur-shape—a horse and rider with outlines blended in the darkness. A moment of suspense, of quick, anxious work on the part of the Invincibles, and then—

A ringing scream, the sound of a blow, a great sob from brave Bob Lyon, and then, with the captive struggling in his arms, back to his men rode Major Menace in triumph!

"Quick, boys—lend a hand, some of you," cried a tall youth—the first to reach Lyon's side. "Poor Bob is hard hit!"

"Hard hit!—it's his death he's got!" another ejaculated, catching Lyon's arm. "Forward with you, boys! We must reach Yellow Dust—the sooner, the better! Saul Scott an' I'll keep Bob in the saddle."

The outlaws were speeding away as rapidly as the darkness would permit, and further effort in the direction of a rescue just then would be worse than useless. With heavy heart the Invincibles wheeled about, and, with their stricken comrade in their midst, proceeded down the pass at a sharp canter.

The ride to Yellow Dust was accomplished in unbroken silence. Arriving at the St. George Hotel, they dismounted, and Bob Lyon was lifted from his saddle.

"He's dead, boys!" uttered big Saul Scott, in an awed undertone. "Lay a-holt, easy-like, an' we'll get him inside."

At that juncture a group of five men appeared at the door of the bar-room, and to the inexpressible relief of the Invincibles, they recognized the foremost as their leader, Little Lightning.

Great was the sorrow and indignation of the young ranger chief and his brother Kent at Bob Lyon's sad fate, while James Orndare, Bolly Darrit and Old Dan Rackhoss were moved scarcely less deeply.

"Carry the poor fellow in, boys," said Little Lightning, clearing a passage to the door. "Let us do all we can for him, there—"

He sprung through the doorway and pointed to the long table upon which Old Dan had been placed a short while before.

A glance showed that Lyon was dead—had died almost instantaneously. The handle of an eight-inch bowie-knife protruded from his left breast!

"How did it happen?" and Little Lightning turned to Saul Scott.

Minutely, the young Hercules described the events of the afternoon and evening. The Invincibles had lost the trail of Captain Marks and his men, and, after a long and fruitless search, had pushed on to Yellow Dust, with the intention of entering the camp through the pass leading to the northward, and thus had met Menace and his party.

As Saul narrated the details of the struggle—described in his rough yet eloquent style the attempt of heroic Bob Lyon to rescue Rachel Carson against such desperate odds, Orndare's eyes grew wet and he sobbed like a child, while old Bolly Darrit turned away and strode moodily to and fro, making vigorous use of his bandidana.

The effect upon Little Lightning was fully as intense, yet widely different. The color fled from his face. His lips trembled, then settled in hard, unyielding lines. His eyes filled with a dark, scintillating glow, and every fiber in his lithe young body seemed drawn to its utmost tension.

"He lived and died a hero!" he said, in a hard, choked voice, as Saul ended, and stooping he pressed back the dark-brown hair and imprinted upon the broad white forehead a lingering kiss.

A moment he hovered silently over the lifeless clay, his lips twitching spasmodically. When he lifted his head and faced his fellows, his eyes were dry and hotly burning.

"He was our hearts'-brother boys!" he continued, lowly and with a peculiar intonation.

"He was brave, noble and generous. It was a coward's hand that struck him, and he died doing his duty."

"Ye who are with me for vengeance, look your last upon poor Bob. Not a moment is to be lost. We shall take the trail at once!"

Silently every lad of the ranger band glided up to the table. Hand clasped hand and eye met eye above the voiceless dead.

"It is a compact—a league, the Invincibles is makin'," muttered Bolly Darrit to Orndare.

"Just plant the kid the very best you know how, colonel. Old Dan, Orthodox Pete an' myself are goin' to have a finger in this rumpus—mind that!"

"An' if it's in the power o' humans to fetch back them gals, you'll see 'em soon; bear that in mind, too!"

CHAPTER V.

SEEKING THE TRAIL.

JUST as the sun rose above the far-eastern horizon, twelve horsemen, two abreast, splendidly mounted and armed, and leading four pack-animals, emerged from a dark defile leading back into the hills, and slowly descended the sharp slope before them, halting at the brink of a swift, narrow stream.

That the twelve had seen hard service within a short time was evident. All were jaded-looking, and upon several bandage and compress showed, hiding the marks of bullet and knife.

These riders were the Prairie Invincibles. In the rear with old Rover in leash, was Little Lightning. At the side of the young ranger chief rode Bolly Darrit.

"Now, hyar's trouble!" ejaculated the veteran, relapsing into the vernacular, as he subjected the opposite bank to as close a scrutiny as the distance would permit. "Et's ther fu'st water this side ov Yaller Dust, an' ther condemned skunks hev took to et es straight es ducks!"

"I tell ye, Davy, we hev got ter make slow an' sure ther words in this hyar campaign. Menace is es keen es a fish-hook, he is, an' es desp'ritt a thief es ever went unhang'd. Given hafe a chalice, he'd fang ther hull outfit!"

"You are right, Bolly," Little Lightning admitted, with forced composure. "The stake is too great to risk a misstep."

"Kent, you and Saul Scott ride up-stream, one on each side, as far as you think necessary, and keep a sharp lookout for an ambush. If you discover anything, report just as quickly as possible."

"Here—take Rover with you. His nose may prove sharper than your eyes."

Then, as the two lads rode away on their perilous errand, Little Lightning and Bolly turned and led the way down-stream and into a beautiful little glade about three hundred yards distant, where the party halted and dismounted.

After a brief consultation, Old Dan Rackhoss was appointed to have charge of affairs at the temporary camp, and then Little Lightning and his veteran friend remounted and continued down-stream, one on either bank.

The valley gradually widened as they proceeded, and finally opened into a broad level, covered with a dense forest, across the lower end of which stretched a range of lofty, heavily-timbered hills, broken by numerous passes.

Just before reaching the base of this range, Little Lightning suddenly halted, uttering a sound expressive of intense satisfaction.

The next minute he was joined by Bolly.

"We're on the track," said the young miner, pointing to hoof-prints in the yielding turf. "The Brotherhood passed down the stream."

"An' hev left a spy," the veteran added. "I don't like the looks ov things, Davy! They're p'intin' straight fer Utah!"

"You may be right, Bolly," Little Lightning returned, his face clouding. "That the rank and file of the Mormon hierarchy would do everything possible to screen them, I do not doubt. In fact, the very boldness of this raid goes to show that such would be the case. Menace and his men are not without friends, even in Yellow Dust."

"Yas, yas; friends in plenty, too," the veteran observed.

"But the fact that the party are without pack-animals, so far as we have been able to determine, indicates that their flight is not to be a lengthy one," pursued Little Lightning. "My idea is, that if we succeed in picking up the trail we shall hole the cusses to-day."

"Don't ye bank on that, Davy," Darrit advised, with a shrewd look.

"Now, le's see w'at ther galoot that left ther water right hyar aire up to. Ef we c'u'd on'y git our han's on him—"

Little Lightning nodded grimly, and started forward, a fierce glow coming over his face.

"Easy, boyee," warned the veteran. "Tain't in nater fer you to be patient, I reckon; I c'u'dn't, I know. But at ther same time ther cuss ahead ov us holds a big advantage, an' he's none too good ter drop us both, from under kiver."

"Jest hol' back an' let me hev a whack at

this wrinkle. Pile down off'n yer hoss an' git back inter kiver, fer es soon es ther condemned galoot diskivers that he is followed, he'll double on his trail an' make back ter ther water. When he does that, we've got him."

Without a word, Little Lightning turned aside, leading Darrit's horse, and rode into a thicket, where he dismounted.

The veteran, Winchester in hand, glided forward on the trail with all the stealth of a red-skin.

Straight up the side of the bold, wooded spur led the trail, until the ascent became so abrupt as to preclude the possibility of further advance mounted, then veered sharply to the south, rounding a mass of jutting rock.

At this point the wary old detective paused long enough to secrete his Winchester, then with his self-cocking revolvers in hand, crept forward inch by inch, confident that the outlaw was not far in advance.

A glance around the angle of the rock proved his surmise correct.

Tethered to a dwarfed pine only a few rods distant, was a horse. Beside the animal, busy with a small, square package fastened the saddle, stood the spy.

After a moment the outlaw, package in hand, glided away from the horse, laying his course directly toward the summit.

Bolly watched him narrowly.

"Go ahead, my bantam!" he chuckled. "I think I begin to see your leetle game!"

Even as he spoke, the detective again crept forward, using every precaution possible to avoid discovery.

Within twenty minutes the spy had reached his objective point—a barren spot just beyond the summit, on the eastern slope of the hill. Opening the package, he set to work upon its contents with a sort of nervous eagerness, apparently wholly unsuspecting of the proximity of an enemy.

The task required but a moment. When he rose to his feet he raised aloft to catch the rays of the sun a huge, highly-burnished reflector.

Darrit uttered a startled grunt, and the next instant sent a pistol-ball crashing through the center of the frail disk, smashing it into a hundred pieces.

"Hands up! ye condemned sneak!" he grated, springing from his covert and confronting the astounded outlaw. "Hands up! or yer ornery pelt won't be w'u'th takin'!"

The muzzle of a revolver stared the fellow in the face, the hammer half-poised under the steady pressure of the veteran's finger against the trigger, and with a face as colorless as ashes he sullenly obeyed the stern command.

Darrit strode forward, a mocking grin lurking about the corners of his mouth.

"A nice trick fer you ter play, Jimmy Pettin!" he enunciated, his blue eyes meeting the dusky orbs of the captive fiercely, wrathfully. "You, you cur! Stick out yer paws—quick, afore I fergit, an' save the hangman a job!"

Mechanically the uplifted hands of the outlaw came down to a level. His dark eyes glittered dangerously, and into his pallid face crept a reddish glow.

"It's your turn now, Bolly Darrit!" he muttered, in a voice hoarse with chagrin and rage. "Mebbe mine'll—"

Like a flash of light the detective leaped forward, the butt of his heavy revolver descending upon Pettin's skull with crushing force, dropping him in his tracks, senseless.

Just in time, too, was the veteran's maneuver executed, averting, by the fraction of a second, a duel to the death; for as Pettin sunk down inert and helpless, a short, heavy double-barreled pistol slipped from his nerveless hand to the ground.

Bending over his captive, Darrit secured his wrists with handcuffs, and removed his belt of arms.

"I'll trust to luck that ye don't get up an' run away," the detective muttered, as he gained his feet. "Ugh! a close call that! If I hadn't sighted it—"

Something like a shudder completed the sentence, and then with a grim smile Bolly turned away, pulling from his pocket a small field-glass.

Long and earnestly he surveyed the surrounding hills, scanning every nook and cranny visible; but no trace of the Brotherhood was discernible.

"They're there somewhere," he muttered, in a vexed tone, as he put away the glass. "Pettin's signal could have been seen a long distance."

Turning to his captive, the detective found that the fellow had regained consciousness, and was upon his feet, ready for flight.

"That is all right, Jimmy!" he exclaimed, nodding shortly. "Forward, now—just as straight to your horse as you can walk!"

Pettin's heavy jaws closed with a click.

"Have it your own way, Bolly!" he gritted, suddenly taking up the march down-hill. "Be jest a leetle keerful, though, an' not crowd too hard! Menace might git a holt ov it, an'—"

"Shet up!" broke in the detective, contemptuously. "Ye'll git chainte enough to talk, by an' by! Now, mosey!"

There was a gleam in Darrit's usually mild blue eyes that did not escape the observant outlaw, and he silently hurried forward.

Arrived at the jutting rock, Darrit secured his Winchester, then unhitched the horse and compelled Pettin to mount.

"Jest ye ride straight back to the p'int whar ye left ther water," said the detective, sternly. "Don't ye try ter twist right or left; straight ahead—or ye don't go at all!"

So captor and captive quietly made their way down the long, sharp slope, arriving in due time at the point where Bolly had left Little Lightning.

The young ranger was nowhere visible.

Again and again, the detective uttered a peculiar signal of frequent use among the Invincibles, but as often no response came, save the echo from the hills.

Securing the outlaw in the saddle, he tied the horse to a tree, and began a hurried reconnaissance of the vicinity.

"There is something strange about it all," Bolly muttered, as he forced his way into a thicket hard by, following the trail left by the youth. "Davy never went away from here without a good, solid reason. If— Hallo! that's my critter!"

A shrill whinny, an ejaculation of delight, and then with a bound the veteran reached the side of his faithful steed and clutched eagerly at a scrape of paper pinned to the saddle.

A leaf from a memorandum-book, it proved to be, and penciled upon it was the following message:

"BOLLY.—Hurry back to camp and lead the boys down-stream. Have made a discovery, and will leave a plainly-marked trail. D. K."

"Glory!" ejaculated Darrit, shoving the note into his pocket and turning to the horse. "That from Davy, just at this time, means business!"

Mounting, he rode back to his captive, and thence with the outlaw in custody, to the creek.

At that point, he was suddenly confronted by a horseman from up-stream—Saul Scott, the young Hercules.

"What's broke loose?" cried Bolly, ere the youth could speak.

"Nothin'," was the cool reply, as Saul drew rein. "We lit onto ther trail a couple of miles above camp, an Kent an' ther boys aire on ther move. Hurry on, you an' Little Lightnin'."

Darrit uttered a low whistle.

"We cain't do it, Saul!" he exclaimed. "Jest read that," and he handed the young giant Little Lightning's message.

Needless to say, Saul Scott was in turn non-plussed.

"What shall we do, Bolly?" he asked.

"Ther best we kin. Hyar, take this galoot an' hurry back ter ther Invincibles. I'll push on arter Davy. Tell Kent ter send three or four ov ther boyees ter jine us—we'll need 'em 'fore many hours."

CHAPTER VI.

A MAD RIDE.

With what burning anxiety and impatience Little Lightning had retreated to the cover of the thicket, to intercept the outlaw spy and await Bolly Darrit's return, it is not easy to portray.

For the nonce, the coolness of the intrepid ranger had given place to the frenzy of the distracted lover.

What a moment of torture it was!

Why must he supinely await developments wrought by another? Was not Rachel Carson in the hands of foes most unscrupulous?

This last was the thought that goaded him to action. Hardly had Bolly Darrit disappeared when he sprung from the saddle and securely tethered the horses.

"I can at least scout down the creek a short distance," he muttered, leaving the covert. "Even Bolly couldn't object to that! If the spy gives him the slip, my chances of cutting the cunning rascal off from his fellows will be just as good—perhaps better."

And thus musing, he regained the bank of the water-course and rode slowly onward, his eyes busy with their quest.

Not three hundred yards had he thus pro-

ceeded when he suddenly halted, uttering a short, sharp cry.

Just before him, upon the drooping branches of a bush overhanging the water, was a hand-kerchief—a dainty combination of lace and linen, unquestionable a lady's.

Instantly Little Lightning sprung from the saddle and secured the tell-tale article.

A single searching glance was all-sufficient in determining the ownership of the prize.

"It is Rachel's!" he ejaculated, his dark eyes aglow. "The wily devils have carried her down-stream, but she has succeeded in leaving behind her this trace."

A lover-like outburst followed, and then, with his precious souvenir snugly pocketed, he turned and spurred back to the thicket.

Darrit had not returned.

Hastily writing a few lines, he attached the message to the detective's saddle, and returned to the stream.

At the point where he had discovered the handkerchief, he entered the water, and passed onward, closely scanning the banks.

A few minutes passed in silence; then the distant report of a revolver stung through the woods.

"That was Darrit's weapon," he muttered, pausing, irresolutely. "To push on seems almost like deserting a friend in distress."

Then his face grew grim and dark, and he touched spur to his faithful steed.

"There was but one," he continued; "and for bush-fighting I'd pit Bolly against any man in the hills—red or white."

Another mile was covered, and then the channel of the stream became rough and broken, the hills on either side rising steeply and to a greater height.

Little Lightning had reached a point opposite the mouth of a small pass, when the roar of a cataract just beyond him, hidden by a sharp curve in the channel, apprised him that a further descent of the stream was probably out of the question.

"They must have gone up the pass," he thought. "They certainly have not left the stream at a point behind me, and a dozen paces will reveal what is below."

The surmise was correct. Not only was a further descent impracticable, but a survey of the pass disclosed the fact that a body of horsemen had entered it not many hours before.

Marking his trail, the young ranger pushed on up the pass at a rapid pace; yet noiselessly, the iron-shod hoofs of his horse sinking softly into the yielding sand and earth.

"They have thrown precaution to the winds," he mused, glancing at the clearly defined trail. "They did not expect a night pursuit. Sagacious old Rover never entered into their evil calculations."

Scarcely had his mind framed the thought, when forth from a number of unsuspected coverts in each wall of the pass sprung upward of a half-score of masked men—roughly-clad, unkempt-looking fellows, thoroughly armed, and with weapons leveled.

"Hold, Little Lightning! Don't attempt to draw!" sung out the leader of the ill-favored cohort, throwing himself directly into the ranger's pathway. "You are our meat dead or alive!"

A bitter imprecation escaped the lips of the youth, and his hands which had moved swiftly to his belt, fell limply to his sides.

A single swift glance had been sufficient to establish the exact status of affairs. He was in a trap. Resistance, just then, meant defeat and death!

"So be it, Captain Marks," he responded, as coolly as his intense chagrin and disappointment would permit. "I must acknowledge that you've got me into a tight box!"

"Exactly!" laughed the outlaw, grimly. "And the prospect is decidedly in favor of a continuance of the 'box' arrangement!"

"Sulkan, you and Tybo assist the gentleman to dismount. Relieve him of his weapons, and pinion his hands at his back."

An outlaw glided forward from each side of the pass, and the chief's commands were obeyed promptly and to the letter.

"Now, back into the saddle with him," continued Captain Marks. "He is in your hands, and it is for you to see that he is not missing when wanted."

"Forward, men, to the horses."

With the precision of soldiers, the men formed around the captive, and with him in their midst advanced at a double-quick.

A few hundred feet above the point of attack was a sharp bend in the pass, and just beyond the angle thus formed, in charge of two men, were the horses of the band.

"Mount," tersely ordered Captain Marks. Little Lightning drew a breath of relief.

"Thank Heaven! the girls are not here!" he could not help exclaiming, mentally. "To see me in this plight would almost deprive them of hope!"

Then onward swept the Brotherhood, covering mile after mile in utter silence. Just at noon, they turned from the pass into a dry watercourse, and thence made their way, after a sharp scramble, to a small plateau overlooking the pass.

Here Captain Marks ordered a halt.

"We've got to dispose of our captive, boys, as you know, and here is the place to do it," he announced. "At this point we scatter, to meet at the rendezvous, and we can't be burdened with him."

"Little Lightning, your race is run!

"Tybo, your lariat! Noose one end, and fasten the other around the bale of that sapling. We'll swing him over the edge of the cliff."

The young ranger could not repress a shudder.

Yet, he nerved himself to meet unflinchingly the grim fate that seemed inevitable, watching with undaunted eye the hurried preparations.

Bitterly he regretted that he had so quickly yielded—that he had permitted his impatience to override his judgment, but no trace of fear, or of the emotions called into life by thoughts of Rachel Carson, could be detected upon his set, stern face.

"It is hard, boy—bitterly hard!" uttered Captain Marks, slowly, his basilisk eyes gleaming coldly through the apertures of his mask. "But—business is business! Were we to release you, it would put our own necks in the halter!"

"Right, captain!" Little Lightning enunciated, a reddish glow appearing in his black eyes. "Were I to escape, Judge Lynch would have business with you and yours before many days!"

"Just so!" and the outlaw nodded viciously. "Boys, help him from his horse."

"Hold, captain!" cried the young ranger, his voice high and clear, the muscles standing out from his body in great cords, as the men started forward. "Hold! I prefer death by the bullet—if death it must be!"

"Out of the way, you devils!"

A jingle of spurs, a sudden bound of the horse, a mighty wrench, a rending, snapping sound, and as the broken bands fell to the earth, Little Lightning shot forward, leaning from the saddle and dexterously plucking the revolvers from the belt of Captain Marks as he passed that worthy.

Just a breath—then his sharp, shrill cries ringing defiantly through the mountain fastnesses, the dashing youth disappeared below the level of the plateau, charging headlong down the abrupt descent to the water-course!

For a moment the Brotherhood stood appalled. Then, to a man, they sprung to their horses, mounted, and spurred to the edge of the plateau.

There they halted, falling back in confusion, just as Little Lightning turned between the sheltering banks of the dry channel.

"Back!" cried Captain Marks, hoarsely. "It is as much as a man's neck is worth to risk it! Back! we can pick him off as he goes down the pass!"

In hot haste the robber cohort again dismounted, and with weapons in hand, aligned themselves along the brink of the precipice overhanging the pass.

A moment of suspense—then a single shot, followed the next breath by a volley—a ringing shout, defiant and exultant, and Little Lightning was clear of the death-gantlet!

Captain Marks reeled back from the verge of the precipice, his hands clinched, his eyes gleaming savagely.

"Don't waste your lead, boys!" he grated, madly. "You might as well attempt to hit a streak of lightning!"

"You is right, Cap!" declared a grizzled desperado. "Derned ef I ever see'd sech a trick played!"

"The young dare-devil has the best piece of horseflesh in Nevada!" Marks sullenly returned.

"Tybo, you and Sultan must have bound him insecurely."

"Hyar is ther cords," responded the ruffian addressed, stepping forward with the broken bands. "Knot's all right; he bu'sted loose by main force."

An ejaculation of surprise escaped Captain Marks. The buckskin thongs had, indeed, been snapped asunder!

"Gents, it's a feat worthy of Samson!" he cried, flinging the broken strands over the precipice.

"Now remount and scatter. Let each man

cover his trail, for in less than three hours the whole pack of young devils will be on the scent, hot-foot!"

CHAPTER VII. ROAD-AGENTS—A CONFERENCE.

A WEEK later.

The shades of night, black, somber, starless, had settled over Yellow Dust. A chilling north wind swept down the pass, and the streets of the camp were deserted.

Within the bar-room of the St. George Hotel were grouped a half-dozen men, conversing in low, excited tones.

"Hafe-past nine!" suddenly ejaculated a brawny miner, leaning against the end of the bar, as he glanced at the clock adorning the wall opposite. "Gen'lemen, I opine that ther kernel hes run ag'in a snag!"

"I hope not!" asseverated another, earnestly.

"Hyar, too, pard!" a third vigorously declared. "Thar ain't many men es squar' es Jim Orndare."

"Ther more reason fer ther dirty galoots ter fang 'im," remarked the first speaker, calmly producing and filling his pipe. "Sech critters hate men like Jim, wurs'n a bum does water."

"Edzactly," the 'tender chimed in, with a knowing nod, as he rested his elbows upon the bar. "Thur's no gettin' around ther fact that ther huss hes bin held up ag'in, though. Et's two hours overdue."

"A good two hours," supplemented the man at the end of the bar—Si Hart—puffing vigorously at his pipe. "Bless me! ef Yaller Dust ain't on ther boom I don't want a cent! Ther gals stolen, ther Rocky Bar coach held up twice in three trips, an' ther Old Boy a-runnin' loose generally fer a week past!"

"I tells ye, pard, thar's goin' ter be a mighty upsplosion in this part ov ther kentry one ov these days, an' some ov these derned Mormon galoots aire goin' up so high they'll need six feet ov solid clay when they come down!"

"Thet's w'ot!" the 'tender asseverated, thumping the bar with his fist by way of emphasis. "Menace an' his gang aire in cohorts with ther Saints—don't ye fergit it! Ef—"

At that juncture, the door was hurriedly opened, and a new-comer strode into the room—a tall, well-dressed man, with flashing, blue-gray eyes, long white hair, and patriarchal beard.

His face was white and drawn, and about him was an air of nervousness that did not escape the group of loungers.

"Has the colonel returned?" he asked, in a keen, incisive voice.

Si Hart removed the pipe from his mouth.

"Not yet, Mr. Carson," he replied, respectfully.

"Then say to him, the moment he comes, that I wish to see him on urgent business."

"I'll do it, sir."

With a curt nod, Carson quitted the room as abruptly as he had entered it.

A moment of silence followed his departure.

"More high jinks!" muttered Si, with a knowing look. "It beats ther nation, pard—this hyar case. Whar's Little Lightning?"

"Listen!" interrupted the bartender, suddenly lifting his hand. "Thar they come—huss an' all!"

True enough, the rumble of wheels and the heavy tramp of many horses could be heard, and then there was a rush for the door.

The next instant the stage and its escort of a half-score horsemen, drew up before the hotel, to be greeted with a volley of eager interrogations.

Promptly singling out the leader of the troop, Si Hart elbowed his way through the noisy crowd, and delivered Carson's message, whereupon Orndare uttered a few words to one of his mounted companions, and then hastened toward the cottage.

Just as the mine-owner arrived at the edge of the little plateau, a dark shape glided out from the dense shadow of a tree and confronted him.

"Colonel!"

"Who is it?"

The clicking of a revolver accompanied the sternly-uttered question, and Orndare peered sharply at the figure blocking his path.

"Bolly, Jim—ole Bolly!" was the instant reply, in the most guarded of tones. "I'm on my way ter ther house. Ride on, an' ef ther coast aire cl'ar I'll jine ye ther in a minnit. Let me in at a side door, an' mind that ther servants ain't in ther way."

"Ketch my drift?"

"I do, Darrit," and then, as the shape disappeared from his path, the colonel rode onward.

Ten minutes later a door in the west side of the cottage was noiselessly opened, and Orndare, stepping out, uttered a low whistle.

He was instantly confronted by three men.

"Lead on, colonel," requested the foremost, in a husky whisper, as Orndare started back with revolver half drawn. "They're only ther boyees."

With a breath of relief, Orndare led the way into the house and secured the door. Procur-ing a light, he proceeded straight to the library, where Lewis Carson was found in waiting.

There the three visitors removed their facial disguises, disclosing the well-known features of Little Lightning, Kent Kane and Bolly Darrit.

The brothers were in the buckskin garb of prairie rangers, and were well armed. The veteran detective had assumed the guise of a mountain tramp—his favorite role.

As his eyes fell upon the trio, Carson uttered a sharp cry and sprung forward with extended hands, saying:

"Thank Heaven! you are here at last!

"What of my daughter, David, and of poor Millie?—have you found them?"

"No, Mr. Carson, we have not," was the steady reply. "Menace has scattered his men in every direction, and every known precaution has been taken to cover the trail. So far as the whereabouts of the Brotherhood is concerned, we are utterly at sea!"

"Exactly!" supplemented Bolly Darrit, quickly; "but we hain't thrown up ther sponge."

"Colonel, we're hyar ter talk bizness—privately. Kin ye make sure we won't be heard?"

"Certainly; you may proceed with perfect safety."

"Then, colonel, s'pose ye tell us w'ot has happened in Yaller Dust sence that night."

Orndare started.

"You have heard—"

"Nothin' definite, colonel," interrupted Darrit, quietly. "Jest ye tell us."

"Well, then, to be brief, the Rocky Bar stage has twice been held up, and Carson and myself have been heavy losers."

"Wa-al!" ejaculated Darrit, rubbing his hands softly, and flashing a significant glance at Little Lightning and Kent. "Wa-al! wa-al! that was hard luck, to be sure!"

"But go on, Orndare—tell us all about et."

"The first robbery occurred night before last," pursued the colonel, as he lighted a cigar; "the second only a few hours ago, and at the same place—the ford above the big island in Snake Creek."

"On both occasions, the hearse was halted just before entering the water, the road-agents appearing from the numerous fissures in the rock at that point."

"About three thousand dollars were secured the first haul, and to-night five thousand more were taken, the scoundrels literally gutting the stage to secure it."

"Yesterday, I organized a posse and rode down to the ford, but not a trace whereby the road-agents might be trailed could we find, although we searched the vicinity most thoroughly."

"Then, again to-night, when it was found the stage was late, we hastened there, arriving on the scene just after the miscreants had vanished."

"But, the singular part of the affair is the fact that the attack was made upon the incoming stage, and just at the right time. Any one at all familiar with the business of the line would know that such an attack would very likely prove to be a water-haul, while a like descent upon the cut-going coach would almost infallibly pan out handsomely."

"True," affirmed Darrit, reflectively, as Orndare paused. "But, colonel, how do you explain it all?"

"My explanation is simply this: The road-agents have a spy in camp, and that spy has by some means obtained an inkling of the fact that Carson and myself had money in transition those days."

"It would have been easy for a spy to have obtained such information?"

"Yes; an adroit fellow would have found the task not at all difficult," Orndare admitted. "While we have not openly mentioned the matter, yet we have taken no especial care to make it a state secret."

"Texas Tom had charge ov ther huss?"

"Yes, and a more trusty fellow never held ribbons on that line."

"You're right, colonel," declared Bolly, with an emphatic nod. "I know old Tom—know him like a brother!"

"But were ther any passengers?"

"On the first trip, no. Yesterday Moses

Baumschell went down to the the Bar, and was on the hearse to-night. He became impatient at the delay occasioned by our arrival, got a horse from one of the boys and rode on to camp."

"Wa-al, that's ole Bumshell, to a cent," Bolly remarked, with a peculiar smile. "I kelkilate ter hev bizness with him 'fore many moons."

"Do you suspect him?" queried Carson.

"Yes—to be plain about it."

At that juncture, Kent noiselessly arose and quitted the library.

"Now, what is your opinion of this road-agent business, Darrit?" Orndare asked. "Do you connect it with the abduction of the girls?"

"I most certainly do!" avowed the detective. "More than that, I can't say jest yet."

"We hev formed a theory ov our own in regard to ther Brotherhood ov Fortune, an' this appearance ov road-agents tends ter strengthen that theory."

"If we could capture one of the miscreants," suggested Orndare, "We might squeeze something from him."

Bolly shook his head.

"Twon't work," he declared. "We've tried it, an' ther cuss cain't be made ter talk wu'th a copper."

At that moment, Lewis Carson drew from his pocket a letter, which he handed to Orndare, saying:

"Read that, Jim. I found it awhile ago, pinned to the door with an eight-inch blade. If you saw Si Hart at the hotel, you will now understand why I left the message with him."

Bowing slightly the mine-owner nervously opened the missive. A glance at the handwriting confirmed his suspicions as to its source.

"It is from the Brotherhood!" he muttered, growing deathly pale. "I'll read it aloud."

GENTLEMEN:—Pursuant to the promise contained in our communication of a week ago, we drop you these lines, with the hope that you are now ready for business. You have certainly had ample time and opportunity to learn that any and all search for your missing treasures would be without result.

"The simple truth is, they are held for ransom:—

"Upon the receipt of \$25,000—to be paid as herein-after specified—they will be promptly restored to your paternal care, unharmed.

"If you desire to accept this proposition, we would respectfully refer you to Mr. Moses Baumschell, of your place, with whom you are doubtless well acquainted.

"We have placed in the hands of this gentleman a bill-of-sale, purporting to be an instrument witnessing the legal transfer of a certain mining claim from Carleton Nesbitts and Robert Crissell to James Orndare and Lewis Carson, in consideration of the above-named sum. So far as Baumschell is concerned, the transaction is *bona fide*, and if you are wise you will not inform him to the contrary.

"The day the Jew receives the money, and you, in return therefor, the bill-of-sale, your daughters will be released and provided with a proper escort to Yellow Dust.

"This proposition will remain open one week.

"THE BROTHERHOOD OF FORTUNE."

Bolly Darrit drew a long breath as Orndare finished reading the communication.

"Thet is es purty a little scheme es was ever hatched!" he ejaculated.

"But what shall we do in the matter?" cried Carson. "The artful devils have us by the heels, and we are well-nigh powerless."

"It doesn't look very promising for us," Little Lightning admitted, frankly. "Yet, much may be accomplished in a week."

"We had better accept their terms and pay the money," gloomily averred Orndare.

Darrit took a turn or two across the library.

"Oh, w'u'dn't I like jest ter git my two han's on one ov ther galoots!" he growled, suddenly pausing beside the table in the center of the room. "Oh, w'u'dn't I make ther fur fly, though! W'u'dn't I turn myself inter a ginoine ole inquisition, though! Wa-al, mebbe—"

Orndare lifted his hands instantly checking the outburst.

A succession of startling sounds came from without—sounds that could have but one interpretation.

A desperate struggle of some sort was in progress directly beneath the library windows.

Hesitating not an instant, Lewis Carson glided forward, opened the blinds and hoisted the lower sash of the window nearest him.

Then came the sound of a heavy blow, and the next minute Kent Kane appeared at the window, half-carrying, half-dragging a burly form.

CHAPTER VIII.

SI HART'S PREDICAMENT.

UTTERING a startled cry, Lewis Carson shrunk back from the window, his pallid face the picture of amazement and alarm.

"By heavens! there is a mistake somewhere!"

he exclaimed, as the young ranger forced his half-senseless captive into the room. "What is the trouble, Kent?"

"Nothing to speak of, sir. Will you please to close the window? This affair should by all means be kept as quiet as possible," and the youth pulled his captive aside and pushed him into a chair, where the light shone full upon his face.

"Si Hart!" cried Orndare, visibly surprised.

"Si Hart!" Bolly Darrit ejaculated, with an inscrutable smile.

"Exactly, gentlemen, and a spy!" Kent coolly returned.

"A spy!—impossible!" and Orndare grew white to the lips. "He is one of our most trusted men."

"Nevertheless, he was caught listening at the window—caught dead to rights!" put in Darrit, crisply. "Eh, Kent?"

"Yes; he was listening at the window," affirmed the ranger, with a short little nod. "I heard a stifled sneeze out there, and went out to investigate. The fellow was crouching at the window. I watched him several minutes, to assure myself that I was not mistaken as to his motive or object."

"Then, I thank Heaven that he was detected and foiled!" fervently avowed Orndare.

"Not more than I!" echoed Carson, turning from the window to the captured spy, his brilliant eyes flashing irefully. "The traitorous dog! he deserves to die!"

"Easy, boss!" the fellow protested, suddenly sitting upright in the chair and facing Carson with an air almost defiant. "Don't ye take everything fer granted. Et don't need teroller that bekase I war under that winder I am a traitor. W'ot c'u'd a man heer out thar, enyway? Jes' nothin'—ef et kems ter that!"

"But what were you doing there?" demanded Orndare, sharply.

"Layin' fer ther galoots w'ot follered ye from ther camp!" was the bold reply. "They war ther spies! Ef Kane hyar hadn't a' bin too fast fer me, I'd a' nailed 'em both. Es et is—wa-al, et's no use ter talk—they're gone, an' I reckon that ends et!"

"Hardly," Kent returned, smiling grimly. "The fact is, Hart, it is useless for you to kick. The case is dead against you."

"Bolly, will you examine that window?"

The veteran promptly complied. He discovered that the window had been tampered with—that the putty had been stripped from a lower pane, so that the glass could readily be forced outward an inch or more, making it possible for an eavesdropper to hear distinctly even a whisper uttered within the library.

As the detective announced the result of his examination, Si Hart's face became bloodless, and he sprung from his seat, wild with rage.

"Et's a putt-up job!" he roared, brandishing his huge fist. "Et's a putt-up job! I know w'ot you fellers aire after, but et won't work—et won't, I tell ye! Git out ov my way—I'm goin' right out ov hyar! Darn sech a shebang, any-way!"

"Easy, now," warned Little Lightning, coldly, as he stepped between the entrapped desperado and the door. "Don't you try the fractious dodge; if you do your life won't be worth a pinch of snuff!"

"Bolly, slip on the nippers."

Si Hart sunk back into the chair, utterly cowed. There was something in the attitude of the young ranger most ominous—a something the desperado read aright.

"Now let's search him," Little Lightning continued, as the detective drew back. "If the fellow is really a spy of the Brotherhood, we may find something about him to clinch the fact beyond question."

"That's my idea, exactly," Bolly declared, and, despite protestations and curses, they proceeded to turn Hart's pockets inside out.

The search was not without results most satisfactory.

A slip of paper fluttered to the floor, and as Orndare seized it he uttered a cry of satisfaction.

"That settles it!" muttered Darrit.

"Yes, it is a message from the Brotherhood," the mine-owner averred, narrowly scanning the slip. "It is without date or signature, but the handwriting is identical with that of the communication we have just received. It says:

"HART:—The time for quick, sharp work is at hand. Let nothing slip you. See B—daily."

A cry of rage escaped Hart, and if looks could have killed, the five friends would have been annihilated.

"Quick, sharp work—let nothing slip—see B—daily," mused Darrit, thoughtfully strok-

ing his smooth chin. "Gentlemen, that paper is worth something!"

"So much that we'll keep it," Orndare added. "I suppose, Bolly, that the B—of one is the Baumschell of the other?"

"Just so, colonel, an' we'll see both, later on."

"The first thing to do, however, is to make Si Hart blab."

"Never!" gritted that ruffian, resolutely. "I won't talk—I know nothin' ov ther Brotherhood!"

"So much the worse for you!" said Carson, grimly. "I don't see any chance for you to escape alive."

"I kin die with a still tongue!" was the dogged response.

"That remains to be seen," Orndare observed, his black eyes beginning to blaze wrathfully. "This is a desperate case, and the end justifies any means. You shall either make a clean breast of it, or be put to every torture that our ingenuity can invent."

"That's right!" cried Bolly Darrit, with a vigorous nod. "Two pure and innocent girls have been torn from home by a cohort of inhuman outlaws. You are a member of that cohort, and you shall tell us where those girls have been taken, or, by the eternal Rockies! you shall die by inches!"

There could not be an atom of doubt that the veteran detective was in deadly earnest. His ruddy face had grown colorless, his usually mild blue eyes emitted a lurid glow, and his tones sunk almost to a whisper—cold, clear, sibilant.

"Yes, yes!" echoed Little Lightning and Kent, starting forward, with weapons half-drawn.

As might have been expected, Si Hart again changed color, and cowered down in the chair. The ebullient wrath of the five was deadly enough to have frightened a man far braver than he.

Though visibly alarmed, the outlaw had no intention of disclosing his knowledge of the Brotherhood.

"Go ahead!" he muttered, between his set, colorless lips. "You are five to one, but I defy you!"

In the fire-place smoldered a bed of coals. Without a word, Orndare strode across the room, heaped on kindlings and wood, and fanned the coals into a lurid blaze.

"Off with his boots and bind his ankles," he ordered, smiling coldly as he noted the look of consternation upon the captive's face. "We shall stop at nothing to obtain the secret."

"Hold!" cried Hart desperately. "I can stand anything but fire!

"Give me a show, and I will talk!"

The five men exchanged glances.

"We will give you your liberty when the girls have been recovered," said Darrit assuming the office of spokesman. "That is, provided you tell the whole truth."

For a moment Hart seemed lost in thought. Orndare thrust the poker into the fire.

"I'll do it," cried the captive. "I can't tell you much, for I don't know much; but what I do say, you can depend upon."

"Go ahead," said Darrit. "Where are the girls?"

"I don't know—somewhere within five miles of Yellow Dust. The exact place is known to but three or four men."

Again Bolly and his companions looked at each other.

"Oh, it's the truth I'm givin' you," Hart declared, vehemently. "The trail led miles away, I know, but it was to mislead you as to the whereabouts of the rendezvous."

"Major Menace, the head of the band, is an extremely suspicious galoot, and, to guard against treachery he has conveyed the girls to a secret cavern, where they are held in custody by two of his most trusted men and his wife, Dolores, who, by the way, is an old acquaintance of yours."

"Of ours?" exclaimed Orndare, in surprise.

"Yes; she is none other than the Inez Carro, who disappeared from your house the night your daughters were abducted. She drugged the girls, and it was through her that Menace and his men gained admittance to the house."

"The she-devil!" Darrit ejaculated. "But, Hart, of how many men is this Brotherhood composed?"

"I don't know—from twenty-five to thirty, I suppose. The men remained hidden away in the hills in small detachments."

"And they are identical with the road-agents?"

"Yes, I think so; Menace is the head of both bodies," was the reluctant reply.

"What is the 'quick, sharp work' referred to in this message?"

"Keeping Menace posted as to the shipment of money. It is reported that the \$25,000 ransom money will be brought up from Rocky Bar within the week."

"And the road-agents would seize it?"

"Yes. It is calculated to make not less than fifty thousand on the deal."

"It is just as I suspected," exclaimed Orndare, clinching his hands.

"We'll foil 'em yet, colonel," Bolly declared.

"Now, Hart, one question more. Who is B—?"

"My side-pardner, Bolivar Blackstone. But little good will that do you, as Bolivar never ventures into camp."

After two or three more questions, Bolly and Orndare stepped aside for a brief conference. When it had ended, Hart was conducted into an adjoining apartment and securely bound.

"The fellow's tale corresponds with that of Jimmy Pettin," remarked Little Lightning, as they re-entered the library; "and yet I cannot bring myself to a belief that he has told the truth."

"Nor I," Bolly declared. "But let's get at the meat in the cocoa-nut, and quickly, too."

Seating themselves at the table, the five entered into a earnest discussion of the situation.

CHAPTER IX.

BAITING A TRAP—THE APPARITION.

A SHORT distance south of the St. George Hotel was a long, low building of rough slabs, bearing across its narrow front in tall, ungainly letters:

"MOSES BAUMSCHELL,

"Bonanza Stars and Gold Mine of Bargains."

Midnight was near at hand, and the three or four miners lounging about the interior of the Bonanza knocked the ashes from their pipes and sidled up to the bar at the rear of the room.

"Give us our night-caps, Mose," cried the foremost, a tall, red-whiskered fellow. "Name yer stuff, pards, an' we'll drink an' git out."

"Death ter ther road-agents!" exclaimed one, as he lifted his glass.

"An' more power ter Orndare!" another added.

"Amen!" ejaculated he of the red beard, and then the glasses were drained.

A moment later the trio quitted the Bonanza, followed by a peculiar look from Baumschell.

A wiry, dapper little fellow was the Jew, as lithe and agile as a cat; and his nose alone betrayed his Hebrew blood. His eyes were as blue as a summer sky, his hair and mustache a bright brown, and his speech was smooth and unbroken.

From the day Baumschell had pitched his tent in Yellow Dust, he had done a booming business. His was the principal general store of the camp, and his bar had been most liberally patronized.

He employed an assistant, or clerk, but on this evening that worthy chanced to be absent, and the task of closing the establishment for the night devolved upon the Jew himself.

As soon as the trio had quitted his place, Baumschell came out from behind the bar, and carelessly made his way to the front entrance.

At the threshold he was suddenly confronted by James Orndare.

"Good-evening, colonel!" ejaculated the Jew, with evident surprise. "Step in—step in!"

"Don't care if I do, Mose," was the indifferent response. "You may let me have a good cigar; and, while I'm smoking, we may as well talk business. It is late, but—"

"Peeshness ish peeshness," as my countrymen have it," said the Israelite, briskly, as the mine-owner hesitated. "Just step back to the bar, colonel, and help yourself, while I close up. I'll be with you in a minute."

Nodding assent, Orndare sauntered slowly down the long, narrow room. At the bar he secured and lighted a cigar, and then helped himself to a seat near the stove.

Moses Baumschell was not long in joining him.

"Now, colonel, what can I do for you?" the Jew asked, coming at once to the point, just the trace of a crafty smile lurking about the corners of his thin red lips.

"Have you a paper for me—a legal document of any kind?" queried Orndare in return, his piercing black eyes staring straight at the face of the Jew.

"Me?—no! What sort of a legal document should I have?" Baumschell ejaculated, with a look of surprise. "I am not an officer of the law."

"That is very true; but have you not been requested to act as the agent of Carleton Nesbitts and Robert Crissell in a certain matter?"

"No, I have not," declared the Jew, and he shook his head as if thoroughly puzzled.

"Sure?"

"As certainly as I stand here!"

Orndare's face expressed disappointment.

"I am sorry to have troubled you, Mose," he said, rising. "I received notification this evening, however, that you had been selected to represent the parties I have named in a matter in progress between us. It is probable you will receive a like notification later on. I will see you again."

"Wait," requested Baumschell, suddenly gaining his feet. "It is possible that I have spoken too soon. Let me open my mail—haven't had a chance to look at it yet."

"What was the nature of this business?"

"The transfer of a mining-claim," Orndare replied, puffing vigorously at his cigar to hide his agitation at the turn affairs were taking.

"Well, sit down, and I'll see," and Mose turned to the inverted store-box doing service as a desk.

After due search, he brushed aside a heap of papers, and with a cry of satisfaction rejoined his visitor, bearing in his hand the document in question.

"Here it is!" he exclaimed, with a flourish. "Bill of Sale of the Yellow Jacket Claim, of Rocky Bar—Whew, colonel! Twenty-five thousand! Sure you're not striking a snag?"

"Oh, yes! But let me see the document, Mose!"

"Certainly. You're not going to leave us, colonel?"

"No."

The bill-of-sale had been drawn up in regular form, and accompanying it was a letter to Baumschell, giving him the power of attorney in the matter.

"It all seems straight enough," said Orndare, as he handed the papers back to the Jew. "According to your instructions, we have a week in which to make the payment?"

"Exactly."

"Well, if the hearse pulls through to-morrow unmolested, I may be able to pay you five thousand as a clincher, and the remainder in five days. Will that be satisfactory?"

"Father of Abraham—yes! Pay it to suit yourself, colonel," the Jew replied, with unwonted earnestness. "Why should I crowd you? The men are perfect strangers to me—never put eyes on 'em that I know of. I can't understand how they came to select me!"

"Well, I dare say it would be no mystery to your friends," remarked Orndare, dryly, and bidding Baumschell good-night, he left the store.

"Trapped!" softly laughed the Hebrew, rubbing his hands briskly, as the door clanged behind his departing visitor.

The day succeeding this eventful night dawned bright and clear, and long ere the sun rose above the hills to the eastward, the Prairie Invincibles were astir.

After a hasty breakfast, the horses were saddled and bridled, the pack-animals loaded, and then all stood awaiting the command to move.

Little Lightning and Saul Scott had drawn aside, and were engrossed in a low-voiced but animated conversation.

Old Bolly Darrit, Kent Kane, and the captive outlaw, Jimmy Pettin, were nowhere to be seen.

"Hurry up, thar, you cubs!" growled Dan Rackhoss, the grizzled marshal of Yellow Dust, as he impatiently clambered into the saddle. "Straddle horses, boyees; we'll leave 'em moonin'!"

At that juncture the two young rangers turned toward their fellows, and the next minute all were in the saddle.

"Boys, ride on to the Lode," said Little Lightning. "Corral the pack-animals, and employ the day scouting through the hills by twos. Saul and myself will probably join you along toward midnight."

"The rendezvous of the Brotherhood is not many miles from Yellow Dust, and if you strike a trail or sign you'd better proceed with extreme caution."

"Thet's us," returned Rackhoss; and then the Invincibles moved forward, laying their course to the southwest.

"Well, Saul," said Little Lightning, turning to his herculean friend, as the departing "brigade" disappeared behind a wooded swell,

"we may as well press on to the ford. By the time we have secreted our horses and explored the island, the afternoon will be pretty well advanced."

"That's about my idea of it," Saul averred. "By gemently! if we kin only sight 'em, Davy, I reckon they'll heer from us! Eh?"

The young ranger simply nodded; but the gleam lighting up the depths of his black eyes spoke volumes to his big-hearted friend.

"Ef they'll only fall into Orndare's trap!" pursued Saul, fondling his revolvers. "Dern 'em! w'u'dn't I like ter puncture a few of their rascally pelts, though!"

"I only hope the chance may be offered us," said Little Lightning, grimly; and then silence came over the two, and during the next hour not more than an occasional word was exchanged.

"Thar's ther Rocky Bar trail," Saul suddenly exclaimed, as they rode out of the defile some miles from their starting-point.

Little Lightning drew rein.

"The ford isn't far below," he said. "We'd better get the horse under cover and proceed afoot from this point."

"Thar's a sort of blind gulch cuttin' into ther side of ther defile a couple hundred yards back," suggested Saul.

"Thet'll do. Run the critters back, and cover the trail in and out. I'll scout ahead as far as the road. Kent may have left some sign."

Saul hurried away with the animals. Half an hour elapsed, and then he emerged from the defile afoot, and sought Little Lightning's trail.

Half-way to the road he came upon his young chief, seated on the trunk of a fallen tree.

"They have gone down," Little Lightning announced, gaining his feet. "Carson and Orndare have returned. We shall find Kent somewhere near the island."

"Good!" ejaculated Saul. "Le's move on—I'm anxious ter see ther end of this wrinkle."

They at once started forward, keeping pretty well back in the heavy timber skirting the trail, and after a few minutes descended into a narrow valley.

Here their progress was much slower. Not only was the way all but blocked by the dense undergrowth, but they felt that they were upon dangerous ground, and proceeded with the utmost caution.

"There's the ford," said Little Lightning, pointing to a wide, shallow-looking expanse of water some distance beyond them, as they at length halted in a small open space. "We must be just about even with the head of the island."

"Then we'd better change our course so's ter strike et about midway," Saul suggested. "Thar's better kiver lower down."

Little Lightning nodded assent, and they glided on until they had reached the bank of the stream, while they paused to survey their surroundings.

The ford was fully five hundred feet above them, but from the undergrowth reaching down to the water's edge they could obtain a clear view of it. A short distance below the ford, the island rose sharply from the water, breaking the current into two streams, neither of which was less than sixty feet in width.

Of this island, little was known. It was perhaps a quarter of a mile in length, and in width from fifty to two hundred and fifty feet. Its surface was extremely rough, masses of rock rising to a considerable height in places, while the lower portions were covered with timber and a perfect tangle of undergrowth.

After a thorough reconnaissance of the vicinity, the two rangers continued down-stream in quest of Kent, finding him at a point just above the lower end of the island.

"I am awfully glad you are here," he declared, as he wrung their hands. "Some frisky outlaw on the hill southwest of Yellow Dust has been busy all morning with a reflector similar to the one Bolly smashed for Pettin, and, without joking at all, I was becoming alarmed."

Little Lightning's face brightened.

"I shall accept that as pretty good evidence that their stronghold is somewhere in this vicinity," he avowed.

"But where is the canoe, Kent?"

"Just below us, hidden in the rushes. It kept the three of us busy to get it here before day-break, but we succeeded."

"And Bolly—did you learn if he discovered anything?"

"Yes. He detected Baumschell stealing out of camp about two o'clock this morning, and followed him; but the Jew was too slippery for him, and vanished somewhere near the ford. As we came down we met Bolly returning."

"Good enough! They are walking straight into the trap! They'll attack the coach to-night,"

and we'll be on hand to see where they vanish to so mysteriously!"

"Le's launch ther canoe an' slip over ter ther island," suggested Saul Scott. "Ther upper end will be ther p'int ter lay fer 'em."

The proposed movement was at once enacted. Disembarking near the head of the island, the trio drew the canoe out of water and carried it inland a short distance, where it was concealed in a clump of bushes.

The next step was an exploration of the island—a task requiring no little time and patience. Although they did not then realize the fact, their labor met with an adequate reward.

Midway of the island, at its widest point, rose a rocky, cone-shaped hill of considerable extent, and to all outward appearances as solid as adamant.

What, then, was the surprise of the trio to discover that it was simply the rim of a large, irregular basin—a rock-walled lake—having a narrow outlet into the eastern branch of the creek!

"Et looks es ef ther hull center of ther hill hed dropped out," vowed Saul Scott, as he peered sharply at the water twenty feet below. "Reckon thar c'u'd be a hole in ther walls, Davy?"

The question fairly startled Little Lightning. Without a word, he turned and walked slowly around the basin, narrowly scanning its abrupt walls of rock.

Kent proceeded in the opposite direction, halting when he had reached the east shore of the island.

Little Lightning shortly appeared on the opposite side of the winding fissure, or outlet.

"The walls are solid—not a break in them that I can discover," he answered.

"Same here," Kent returned. "If the rendezvous in the vicinity of the ford, it is probably across the creek there. The bank is high and rocky, and full of fissures. In fact, it looks as if the hill might be honeycombed with caverns."

"True," asserted Little Lightning; and then, keeping under cover as much as possible, they retraced their steps to Saul Scott.

Completing their explorations, the three rangers returned to the spot at which the canoe had been concealed, and there proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as possible, pending the arrival of the stage at sunset.

Saul took upon himself the onerous duty of sentry, thus giving his friends an opportunity to secure a few hours of much-needed rest.

Faithfully, the young Hercules kept his vigils. As the forenoon wore on, the sky became dark and lowering, and finally a drizzling, misty rain set in, while a light fog began to rise along the creek.

"This is cheerful!" muttered Saul, with a grunt of disgust, as his surroundings grew more and more indistinct. "Blamed ef 'tain't goin' ter be a nasty ole night!"

Little Lightning and Kent were as yet happily unconscious of the unpropitious change in the weather, both being soundly asleep under the sheltering branches of a low-growing live-oak.

As the day advanced, the fog thickened. By the middle of the afternoon, Saul found it impossible to distinguish objects at a distance of ten feet, and he became conscious of an oppressive feeling—a feeling of vague, indescribable uneasiness—and he at length decided to arouse his companions.

Scarcely had the young rangers gained their feet, when the steady dig of a paddle sounded near at hand, warning them of the approach of a canoe.

Little Lightning uttered a word of caution, and the three listened intently. After a moment the slight plashing was succeeded by a commotion among the flags at the edge of the island, as if the prow of the canoe had been driven into them.

Then followed a faint rustling of the dampened leaves strewing the ground, and as the lads gripped their weapons they were suddenly confronted by a slight willowy figure.

"My God!" ejaculated Saul Scott, reeling back and betraying deep agitation. "It is Mabel Vane!"

CHAPTER X. MABEL'S MISSION.

As the young Hercules shrank back with that low, sharp cry, his ruddy, honest face blanching to a deathly pallor, his keen, gray eyes glowing with horror, Little Lightning and Kent sprung to his side, in utter bewilderment.

What mystery was this?

Who was this girl—this Mabel Vane? What was she to Saul Scott that his stanch heart should fail

him—that he should shrink back, dismayed, appalled, when thus brought face to face with her?

These were the startling queries pressing themselves upon the ranger brothers, even as they sprung to the support of their friend, and intuitively their eyes sought the face of their mysterious visitor.

And what a face it was! A pure oval, dark almost as a Gypsy's, yet clear and fresh, with sloe black eyes, curving red lips, and teeth glistening white and pearl-like as she stood smiling at the trio. A simple straw hat covered her tightly-coiled black hair; her dress was of plain, dark material, and Indian-made moccasins incased her symmetrical little feet.

"Saul!"

Just the one word—that was all, and enough. Coily uttered, yet with a degree of expostulation in the liquid voice, it brought the young giant to his senses as effectually as if accompanied with a dash of ice-water.

A burning flush instantly took the place of pallor, and with a growl of delight he shook off the hands of his friends and lurched forward with outstretched arms.

Little Lightning and Kent literally "held their breath," and, out of consideration for Miss Vane's blushes, turned away. Big Saul Scott was looming up in a new light.

"Hey, boyees!" he called, after the lapse of a few minutes; "look hyar!" And then, distinctly, as they approached:

"Miss Vane, let me make you acquainted with my friends, David and Kent Kane, of whom you have heard me speak."

"Gentlemen, my betrothed, Miss Mable Vane!"

The young rangers inclined themselves profoundly, and in graceful terms acknowledged the introduction. Then, after a few minutes' conversation, they retreated to the other side of the island.

"Davy," exclaimed Kent, as they seated themselves in a sheltered nook, "pinch me! I can't believe that I'm awake!"

"Well, I can assure you that you are," Little Lightning returned, in a matter-of-fact tone. "This occurrence of to-day explains Saul's recent frequent and bootless hunting excursions—the sly dog!"

"But d'asn't it strike you singular, Kent, that the young lady should appear here, and just at this time?"

"Since you speak of it, yes; but despite the singularity of it all, I'll pin my faith to the girl," avowed Kent.

Meanwhile, Saul Scott and Mabel Vane, at the urgent request of the latter, had retreated to the opposite side of the island and seated themselves under a live oak growing close to the water's edge.

"Saul," said the girl, abruptly, after a moment of profound silence on the part of both; "Saul, do you know why I have sought you and your friends here to-day?"

The young Hercules slowly shook his head, and a strange, puzzled look crept over his expressive face.

"I do not know," he replied. "May I ask?"

"Yes; I came at the request of Rachel Carson and Millie Orndare!" was the startling reply.

"You!" ejaculated Saul, starting to his feet.

"Yes—me!" iterated the girl, in a voice of forced calmness. "Sit down, Saul; I have much to say, and but little time; and the sooner certain disagreeable facts are disposed of, the better."

Her lips quivered painfully, and as the ranger looked down into her pale face and misty eyes he felt an uncomfortable lump rising in his throat. With considerably more ceremony than ceremony, he complied with her request, slipping his arm between her shoulders and the trunk of the tree.

"Go on, my dear," he exclaimed, with forced cheerfulness. "If it is anything so very disagreeable, we'll forget it all the sooner!"

"No, it is not to be forgotten," said she, almost sharply. "But listen:

"Who am I?"

"Mabel Vane—the dearest girl on earth!" cried Saul, reverently, his arm tightening about her shoulders, his lips touching her forehead.

"And my father?" she continued, averting her face.

"John Vane, trapper and miner."

"No! John Vane, outlaw and member of the infamous Brotherhood of Fortune!"

"Impossible!" and Saul started as if stabbed.

"It is true!" declared Mabel, steadily. "I discovered it less than a week ago, when the two girls were placed in his custody."

"Ah! they are at the cabin?"

"No; at the secret rendezvous of the Brotherhood. Father has abandoned the cabin for the present."

"And how many are at this rendezvous?" pursued Saul.

"The chief and his wife, the two girls, four men, and father and myself."

"May I ask where it is located?"

"I cannot tell you that."

Saul was silent a moment, pondering all he had just heard.

"You say the girls sent you here?" he queried, at length.

"Yes; we saw you approach the island, and they were very anxious to communicate with you. As both were quite sure that you had not quitted the island, I secured a canoe and started in quest of you as soon as I could slip away."

"And their message?"

"Saul!" exclaimed the girl, in a suppressed voice.

"Well, Mabel?"

"I've got to get away from that outlaw den at once—this very night! Do you know that Captain Jason Marks is forcing his attentions upon me—that my father has sanctioned his suit?"

The announcement brought the young Hercules to his feet, with bloodless face and flashing eyes.

"The—deuce he has!" he ejaculated, explosively, clinching his great hands. "Now, look 'e hyar, Mabel—d'y'e think I'm goin' to stand anything of that sort? Not much! I'll wring that condemned cut-throat's neck!"

The next instant he was down upon his knees, with his arms around the girl.

"I'd like to see 'em tech ye!" he growled, with a sort of grim fondness, a flash of triumph lighting up his gray eyes. "They'll hev to git ye fu'st!"

"Oh, Saul—"

"Never ye mind, girl! I kin skeer up a gospel-sharp er a jestice mighty quick—no trouble 'bout that! An' I reckon them sharks will diskiver thar's a mighty difference betwixt Mrs. Mabel Scott an' Miss Mabel Vane!"

"But, Saul, I must go back!" declared Mabel, smiling through her tears. "You forget the girls!"

The light faded from the young ranger's face. He seemed in a quandary.

"If you'll only tell us where to find the rendezvous," he began slowly, "we'd—"

"That is out of the question," interrupted Mabel firmly. "Though an outlaw, I cannot forget that John Vane is my father. You must not ask me to betray him."

Saul mutely bowed his head. He felt that the rebuke was just.

"There is one way in which the girls may escape," pursued the girl, after a moment of thought. "We have talked it over, and it certainly seems feasible."

"The outlaws feel so secure that no sentry is posted, day or night. If I can reach Rachel and Millie to-night, we will make an effort to get away. Wait for us in the canoe at the head of the island."

"Eureka!" exclaimed Saul, his face brightening. "We'll do it! How will you come?"

"In the canoe there; and be patient, for we may be very late."

"But now I must leave you; I've been away too long," and Mabel arose.

A tender parting, and then the girl sprung into her canoe and pushed out into the stream. With arms folded across his breast, Saul gazed after her disconsolately.

"Dang that Captain Marks!" he growled, clinching his hands, and turning away, as the boat disappeared in the dense fog. "He'd best keep clear of me—the rascally whipper-snapper!"

Making his way across the island, the Hercules rejoined Little Lightning and Kent.

"Wal, boyees, she's gone," he announced, dropping into the dialect. "Kind ov knocked ther props from under me at fu'st, when she sorter kem up out ov ther fog."

"So it seemed," observed Little Lightning. "Where does she live?"

"Oh, back in ther woods a leetle ways," was the evasive reply. "But, I say, ain't you fellers thinkin' it's time ter move on up toward the ford? Ther huss is apt tu kem pilin' long now 'most any minnit, an' ef we're goin' ter trick them road-agents, we'd better be in posish ter see 'em start."

"There's no disputing that fact," said Kent, and he scrambled to his feet.

"Hush!" warned Little Lightning, lifting his head. "I hear paddles."

"Thar's a canoe comin' up-stream," Saul averred, after a moment of listening. "Thar's several paddles. Git down, both ov ye. Mebbe we kin see somethin'!"

The three cautiously extended themselves at full length on the elevated bank, and peered anxiously down-stream. A moment of waiting, and then, just abreast of them, and scarcely a dozen feet distant, appeared the faint and indistinct outlines of two canoes, moving slowly through the water. Each bark carried three men.

"Let's get our boat into water," exclaimed Little Lightning, in a quick whisper, when the outlaws had receded from view. "It won't do to give those fellows too much of a start."

"We ought to 'a' plugged 'em!" Saul muttered, as they hastened toward their canoe. "Dang 'em! that's ther quickest way ter hunt 'em down!"

Silently launching the boat, they placed their rifles in the bottom, then embarked, and pulled cautiously up-stream.

Just as they rounded the head of the island, they were greeted by a rubbing, chafing sound, coming from a rocky point on the east shore directly below the ford.

"They are landing," observed Little Lightning, just audibly. "Now use your paddles cautiously—we must get in sight of 'em without bein' heard, or it's work for nothing."

With the faintest of ripples, the light canoe moved diagonally across the stream, then crept ahead under the bluff eastern bank, until the outlaw boats could be seen through the fog.

Running the canoe beneath a mass of overhanging bushes opportunely at hand, the rangers settled themselves as comfortably as possible to await developments, now confident that they held the whip-hand of the situation.

An hour passed. Then came the rumble of wheels and the clatter of horses on the rocky trail, accompanied anon with the cracking of a whip and the voice of the Jehu—announcing the approach of the stage. Onward it came, at a spanking pace—nearer and nearer, until—

"Halt, Texas Tom! Hold up, or you're a dead man!"

The hail rung out clearly and sharply, and the next minute the coach came to a standstill.

"Hvar we aire, capt'in! Go ahead with yer funeral!" rung out a cheery voice, which the three scouts instantly recognized as that of Texas Tom,

the driver. "Et's a water-haul, though—sure's ye're born! Nary a passenger nor nary a passel this day—thank ther Lawd!"

"Seeing is believing, deacon!" retorted the outlaw spokesman. "To work, boys; riddle the old hearse from boat to box, if need be!"

Then followed the slamming and banging of the coach doors, the restless pawing of the horses, and finally a volley of curses from the disappointed road-agents.

"Satisfied, gents?—ya-as! Wa-al, so-long, an' wuss luck naixt time! *Git up, thar!*"

A mocking laugh from the Jehu, a ringing crack of the whip, and then the horses plunged briskly into the ford and the scene was at an end.

Cursing their ill-luck, the outlaws waited until the stage was out of hearing, then re-embarked and pulled down-stream, passing within arm's-length of the hidden scout.

"Slow and easy," cautioned Little Lightning, as he shoved the canoe out into the stream. "Listen, and let the current do the work."

Several minutes slipped by. The dip of the paddles then ceased, and a cautious command came from some point a short distance down-stream.

The three rangers instantly stopped their canoe. It was quite evident the road-agents had reached their destination.

"Let her s ip along in the middle of the current," whispered Little Lightning. "We must run right past 'em. You fellows watch the main shore—I'll take the island."

The programme thus laid down was faithfully enacted. The canoe was held as nearly midway between shores as possible, and permitted to slip softly along with the current until the island had been passed.

"Well?" queried Little Lightning, in a low tone.

"Nothing," Kent replied.

"Nor here. What shall we do?"

"Pull 'round an' np t'other side ter ther head of ther island, an' disembark," suggested Saul. "Night is comin' on, an' I'm hafe-starved."

"And abandon the search?"

"I reckon so, Davy; ye kin find nothin' in this fog," and the young Hercules uttered a sound between a chuckle and a groan. "Ye might jest as well take my advice, fer I know what I'm talkin' about—I do!"

"*Ther gals will be re-kied afore mornin'!*"

"What?" ejaculated Little Lightning, turning pale.

"Don't trifile!" muttered Kent, hoarsely, as he leaned forward and peered at his comrade's face. "It isn't like you, Saul!"

Laughing softly, the young Hercules thrust his paddle into the water and turned the prow of the canoe, saying:

"It's no joke, pards, but a solid fact. Jest keep quiet now, an' when we git ashore—Wa-al, I'll tell ye sunthin'!"

Without a word, the brothers took up their paddles, knowing that it was useless to urge Saul to make any additional disclosure just then.

Arrived at the head of the island, they beached the canoe, and then proceeded to lunch heartily from the pouch of provisions each carried. When the meal had been finished Saul calmly filled and lighted his pipe.

"Kent!"

"Well, Saul?"

"Whar's yer hoss?"

"Picketed in the hills over there."

"Wal, we'll need 'em by-an' by; better fetch 'im down ter ther ford."

"Davy, kin ye paddle us across?"

"Certainly, Saul," Little Lightning replied. "But what?"

"Nary a word, Davy," blandly interrupted the Hercules. "Ye'll know all soon enough. Jest now, Kent an' we aire waitin' ter git acrost ther crick."

Again the canoe was launched, and the trio paddled toward the eastern side of the ford. When they had reached the bank, Saul said:

"Go back ter ther head ov ther island, Davy, an' wait patiently. Sometime ter-night thet gal ov mine—God bless her!—will git yer sweethearts away from ther Brotherhood. They'll come up ther crick in a canoe, an' expect ter find ye at ther upper eend of ther island. Don't disappoint 'em!"

"Disappoint 'em!" ejaculated Little Lightning, seizing his friend's hand in an ecstasy of hopefulness. "Disappoint 'em! Never! Heaven bless you, girl!—and you, too, Saul Scott!"

"Amen!" uttered Kent fervently.

Tearing himself away, Saul sprang ashore.

"Come on, Kent," he urged. "We'll wait fer ye right about nyar, Davy. When we heer a fox's bark, we'll be on hand ter help onload ther gals."

"All right," said Little Lightning, cheerily, and handing his comrades their rifles he pushed off from the bank and in the deepening gloom hurried back to his post.

Night settled down in the deepest blackness; but as the hours wore away a strong breeze sprung up, clearing away the fog as if by magic; the clouds rolled away to the southward, and the clear waters of the creek reflected the light of countless stars.

Midnight was near at hand when the faint splashing of paddles announced an approach from down stream. Bending his head, Little Lightning listened attentively. The sound became nearer distinct, and presently a canoe containing two men shot into view, heading directly toward the western side of the ford.

The young ranger experienced a pang of disappointment, and silently pushed his boat back into the heavy shadows of the bank.

"Outlaws!" he mused, sharply eying the now receding canoe. "I don't like it—it may frustrate Mabel's plans."

The boat disappeared in the darkness. Half an hour passed, and then it again came into view, passing down the creek.

Little Lightning settled himself for another weary, yet hopeful vigil. The minutes wore slowly away. The wind, gently swaying the trees, and the musical purring and rippling of the waters, combined to lull his senses with their drowsy song.

A piercing scream startled him into wakefulness. Again and again it rung out. Then came a sullen splash—a loud hallo, and a series of short, sharp cries and ejaculations.

His eyes glowing like smoldering coals, Little Lightning caught up his paddle and sent his light craft flying down the stream with all the strength of his powerful arms.

As if by inspiration, he divined the full import of that wild commotion.

The two outlaws had encountered the escaping captives!

Swiftly as his canoe shot forward, the youth was too late. After that first startling outburst, all grew quiet, and when he reached the scene of the supposed meeting the place was silent and deserted. Not a trace of outlaw or captive was to be discovered.

Stifling a groan of anguish and despair, Little Lightning lifted his paddle from the water and with bowed head drifted on, hoping that some sound, however slight might betray the position of his enemies.

Then, as the prow of the canoe struck some bulky, yielding substance, causing the craft to veer sharply, toward the island, out of the dark depths slowly arose a rigid white face, wan and deathlike—a face which the ranger instantly, and to his intense horror, recognized as that of Saul Scott, the young Hercules!

CHAPTER XI.

THE VENTURE.

"WHAR ye bin, Mabel?"

There was a threatening ring in John Vane's voice as he asked the question, and his keen eyes were aglow with suspicion. He stood squarely in his pretty daughter's pathway.

The girl was nothing daunted. She had anticipated just such a salutation, and was prepared for the emergency.

"On the creek, fishing," she replied, lifting into view a dozen fine specimens of the "finny tribe." "Where's Dolores?"

"With ther gals—es usual," growled Vane, stepping aside. "But look'e, gal, ye want ter keep inside ther cave. Ther boyees atop ov Ole Eph hev signaled that ther woods aire full ov spies, an'—"

"As if a spy, or any other creature wi h eyes, could see a rod through the fog out there!" interrupted Mabel, lightly, as she disappeared in the gloom beyond her father.

"Gal-like!" the old outlaw muttered, with an ominous frown. "Kaliker is a bad thing in this bizness!" And his conscience added, "Because this business is a bad thing."

The scene of this meeting of father and daughter was the interior of a cavern of considerable extent. Off to the right a few paces glowed and crackled a bright fire, serving in part to dispel the gloom, the smoke escaping through the numerous seams and rifts in the rocky vault above. To the left the floor sloped downward, ending at the edge of a dark, somber-looking pool, upon which floated several canoes. From one of those boats the girl had just disembarked when hailed by her father.

Here, then in this dark, subterranean place, was the retreat of Major Menace, the secret headquarters of the Brotherhood of Fortune, and the prison of the fair captives, Rachel Carson and Millie Orndare.

As Mabel sped away from her father, something like a gleam of triumph flashed from her bright black eyes. She had dreaded the ordeal of his keen scrutiny.

Turning an angle in the wall of the cavern, she ascended two or three natural steps and entered a narrow winding corridor. Here, two or three lanterns suspended against the walls lighted the way, showing a gradual ascent.

Having traversed this passage, the girl paused before a sort of rude table and put away the fish, then in an unconcerned way lifted a curtain near at hand and disappeared.

The place she had entered was a low but roomy chamber, almost circular in shape, with a cheery fire midway of the stone floor. Beyond this fire, looking haggard and wan in its lurid light, sat Rachel Carson and Millie Orndare, with their treacherous servant, Inez Carro, otherwise Dolores Menace.

"Dios! You startled me!" ejaculated the latter, springing to her feet as Mabel entered. "Where have you been? The gallant captain has come, and has sought you high and low."

"Indeed!" ignoring the question.

"Yes, indeed! He was inexpressibly shocked to find that you had slipped away."

Mabel's eyes flashed.

"The contemptible scoundrel!" she exclaimed, clinching her slender brown hands. "If he has any regard for his eyes or his face, he'll keep his distance!"

A ripple of silvery laughter escaped Dolores.

"Bravo!" she cried, gliding toward the outlet of the chamber. "I admire your spirit and your taste. The captain is a miserable rascal—a low, cunning wretch, utterly devoid of the brain and the genius that makes even a bad man endurable."

"But, Mabel, entertain the young ladies while I prepare supper, will you?"

"Certainly, madame," replied Mabel, her anger vanishing. "If you require assistance, call me."

Then the curtain fell and the outlaw's wife was gone.

The three girls were silent until her footsteps had died away in the corridor. Then Rachel Carson looked up, saying in a low, but eager voice:

"She suspects nothing. The arrival this afternoon of Captain Marks was sufficient excuse for your absence."

"Did you see the boys, Mabel?"

The eagerness with which the question was asked was simply painful, and was shared in an equal degree by Millie.

"All three of them," replied Mabel, guardedly, as she sought a seat between the two. "And that, my darlings, is all I'm going to tell you at present. Imprisonment in this gloomy hole has worn upon you too much for you to endure calmly anything of an exciting nature. Keep perfectly cool and trust in me."

"We shall certainly trust in you," averred Millie, simply, as her arm stole fondly about Mabel's waist. "You have proved yourself true to us on more occasions than one."

Rachel nodded affirmatively.

"When we go, you must accompany us," she said.

"Our home shall be your home."

"I am afraid that I shall have to decline your hospitality," Mabel observed with a deep blush. "In fact, when I leave here I expect to go almost directly to a home of my own."

"You will surely leave here with us?"

"Yes; but Saul insists upon an immediate marriage, and—and—"

There the outlaw's daughter faltered and broke down completely, glancing coyly from one to the other of her friends, her winsome black eyes dewy with joy.

"Oh!" exclaimed both, and the next breath their arms were around her in hearty sympathy. "Saul" was a revelation.

The hours wore slowly away. To Mabel, time seemed never to have dragged by with such leaden feet. Shortly after supper Captain Marks sent his respects, with a request that Miss Vane grant him an audience. In answer, Mabel pleaded a severe headache, and that excuse the captain was compelled to accept. A little later, Dolores Menace joined the trio, remaining until late in the evening.

When she had retired from the chamber, the three girls threw themselves upon a couch and permitted the fire to die out.

About an hour passed, and then Mabel silently arose and glided out into the corridor. A glance showed her that it was deserted, and she cautiously proceeded to the lower part of the cavern. It, too, was empty.

Returning to the chamber, she found the girls up and ready, enveloped in long, dark wraps, with which she had provided them.

"Come on," she whispered. "The men are out of the way. Step lightly and make no noise."

With that, she led the way into the corridor, and thence to the edge of the pool, where she quickly selected a canoe. When they had embarked, Mabel took up the paddle and sent the light boat forward slowly and noiselessly until what appeared to be a solid wall loomed up before them.

Leaning forward, the outlaw's daughter pressed a small knob projecting just above the water-line, whereupon a portion of the wall receded, leaving an aperture several feet square. Through this opening she forced the canoe, then in the starlight paddled rapidly away, finally passing through a narrow outlet directly into the creek.

"Free!" ejaculated Millie, in a low tone.

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Rachel, fervently.

"Not yet," Mabel cautioned, as, with dexterous strokes, she sent the light craft flying down-stream. "Wait until we have reached the head of the island. We are not safe until then. Our flight may have been discovered; if so, a hot pursuit will be made."

Rounding the lower end of the island, the dauntless girl turned up-stream, keeping close in to the shore to avoid the current. Almost half the length of the island had been thus traversed, when a slight sound in their rear caused the fugitives to look back.

Scarcely a hundred feet distant, and fairly flying through the water under the impetus of four paddles, came a long, trim canoe, the outlines of which were just discernible.

Hardly had this startling discovery been made, when, with a slight cry, Millie clutched Rachel's arm and pointed up-stream.

A second boat was approaching.

Were its occupants friends or foes?

The three girls had little time in which to decide the momentous question. It occurred to Mabel that the new-comers might be the young rangers, and she grimly held to her course.

A moment, and then the two canoes ran alongside.

Uttering a shrill scream, Mabel clubbed her paddle and struck savagely at the strangely-white, sardonic face of the foremost of the two occupants of the boat. It required no second glance to establish his identity. He was no less a personage than Major Menace, the chief of the Brotherhood of Fortune.

The paddle fell squarely upon his face, cutting short a cry of commingled surprise and exultation. At the same instant, a gigantic form rose up in the water between the two boats, a long knife flashed upward in the starlight, and descended to the hilt in the breast of the second of the outlaws!

"Paddle, gal—paddle! straight up-stream, es tight es ye kin jump!" cried the man in the water, sharply.

The warning came too late! Even as it was uttered, a strong hand grasped the stern of the canoe containing the girls, and a heavy blow descended upon the head of the gallant giant.

With a low moan he raised his hands and sunk out of sight, inert and lifeless.

The skilfully-planned venture had terminated in a disastrous failure!

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAJOR AND HIS AGENT.

By the time Little Lightning arrived at the head of the island, after setting his friends ashore, they had formed their plans and were moving quietly through the woods, Kent going in one direction and Saul in another.

The Hercules was the first to reach the rendezvous they had agreed upon—a grassy "open" a few rods south of the Rocky Bar trail. Dismounting, he picketed the two horses and seated himself in an obscure covert to await the arrival of Kent.

In the course of a few minutes, the young ranger rode into the glade, disposed of his animal, and joined his friend.

"Do you think we'd best remain here, Saul?" he asked. "Wouldn't it be a good idea for one of us to get down by the ford?"

"Not yet," replied Saul, shaking his head. "The gals will not attempt to move for hours yet. Bime-by one of us'll go down. Jest now, we're both better off right hyar."

And with that Kent had to rest content. About ten o'clock they bridled the horses and led them down almost to the trail, halting behind a heavy cluster of bushes.

"Now, Kent," said Saul, "we'll hitch the critters right hyar. You stay right by 'em—don't git further away than ther trail thar, unless sumthin' unusual happens. I'll go down an' git under kiver at ther ford. When ye hear a fox bark, bring ther horses out."

To all this Kent gave mute acquiescence, and the next minute he was alone.

Arrived at the ford, Saul turned down-stream a few paces and sought cover behind a huge boulder.

For upward of an hour nothing occurred to attract his attention. Then, all at once, a faint, regular splashing greeted his ears, coming from a point two or three hundred yards down the stream.

"That's them!" thought the Hercules, craning his neck in a vain endeavor to pierce the darkness. "Mabel has succeeded!"

But as the minutes sped by, the approaching boat shot past the upper end of the island, and headed directly toward the western side of the ford. And as it drew nearer, Saul could distinguish, not the outlines of the three girls, but of two men, and his heart sunk like lead.

Hardly had he made this discovery, when rapid but stealthy steps on the trail above him attracted his attention, warning him of the approach of some one, and a minute or two later the figure of a man loomed up in the darkness, right at the edge of the wa'er, and not a dozen paces distant.

No sooner had the fellow halted than the prow of the canoe struck the bank at his feet. Then, as the light craft swung around, one of its occupants sprung ashore, saying:

"Tie in close to the bank, Con. There may be spys abroad."

"Exactly, major, let's get to business," pursued the first speaker, turning to the silent figure at his side. "Have you anything special?"

"I have, major," was the prompt reply. "Come—let us retire to a more secluded spot. Our faithful Con will excuse us, I know, when I say that the report I have to make concerns you alone."

"Go on, pards—don't mind me," urged Con, averting his face lest even in the darkness its expression should put the plotters on their guard.

The two men then proceeded up the trail a short distance and halted in a secluded spot.

Saul was not far behind them.

The young Hercules had recognized them by their voices. The first was Major Menace, the Brotherhood chief; the other the Jew, Moses Baumschell.

"Thar's a confab of sum sort on hand—a confab wu't hearin'," he mused, as, with the adroitness of a red-skin he crept through the undergrowth in pursuit of the schemers, determined to take desperate odds, if need be, to learn the object of the Jew's nocturnal errand. "Mose Bumshell isn't out at midnight fer nuthin'."

At that juncture he was interrupted in a startling manner.

The peculiar chirrup of a cricket sounded off to the left, and then a bulky form suddenly loomed up before the young giant, answering the rasping notes with an excellent imitation.

Saul halted, his hand slipping down to the long knife in his girdle, his keen gray eyes fixing themselves upon the men in his path. Even in the darkness there was something familiar about the Falstaffian proportions of the prowler, and with just a trace of a smile the young ranger caught up and repeated the answering chirrup. Then, as he advanced, in the most cautious of whispers came the hail:

"Saul!"

"Right, Bolly," the Hercules replied, as guardedly, as his hand met that of the detective. "What doin'?"

"Stalkin' Bum an' ther major."

"Same hyar. D'ye see Kent?"

"Yes; he told me all. Ye'd best git back ter ther erick. We'll pipe this wrinkle."

"Good! Ef I'm missin' bime-by, keep close ter ther ford til ye see me. Ef ther gals fail ter git out I may find ther way to 'em."

"All right; but look sharp."

With that the friends separated, Bolly Darrit creeping forward, while Saul silently retraced his steps to the boulder.

Taking up his position behind the great stone, the Hercules carefully scanned his surroundings, then turned his attention to the canoe.

The boat was empty.

As he noted this fact Saul chuckled outright. The explanation of the outlaw's absence had readily presented itself.

The wily Con had abandoned his post to overhear the secret conference between Menace and his cunning spy.

His face aglow with satisfaction, Saul laid his rifle at the foot of the boulder, silently removed his boots, belt, coat and cap, and then, armed only with his knife, lowered himself noiselessly into the creek.

The canoe had been moored at an off-set just below the ford, and the water was quite deep. With due caution the young ranger swam up-stream, describing a semi-circle, and approaching the boat at the stern.

"I kin do it," he muttered, after a brief examination of the craft, and with that he sought a convenient nook in the bank.

Meanwhile, Major Menace and his ally having, as they supposed, gained the seclusion so urgently desired just then, were talking over certain matters fully as interesting to Bolly and Kent, and the outlaw, Con, as to themselves.

"I suppose, major, that we shall run as little risk of being overheard right here as at any spot in the vicinity," Mose had observed, after seating himself upon the trunk of a fallen tree.

"I don't believe that we could select a better place without going a considerable distance," Menace declared. "The only thing we have to fear is that that rascally Con may get an idea into his head that it would be profitable to steal up and hear what you have to say."

"The fellow isn't to be trusted," averred Mose, sagely. "It will do very well ordinarily, or where his neck is in the halter. But in a job of the sort we have in hand to-night, he's just one too many."

"My idea exactly. But, to business."

"The coach yielded nothing to-day?"

"Not a sou."

"So I heard," and the Jew laughed grimly. "It wasn't Orndare's fault, however. He came to my place to-night and explained the matter. Carson had neglected to write their agent at the Bar, and consequently they were just five thousand dollars ahead."

"You think, then, they are going to accept the proposition?"

"They will be prepared to do so at the last minute. Of course, they hope to discover your hiding-place during the time intervening. That brigade of kids are scouring the hills, leaving no stone unturned."

"So said the signal on top of Old Eph this morning."

"I know; but the signal did not save Pepper and his detachment."

"What?" ejaculated Menace, gaining his feet with a bound. "Have they taken Pepper?"

"Have you not heard?" the Jew queried, incredulously.

"Not a word," and Menace dropped limply upon the log.

"Well, I dislike to be the bearer of bad tidings, but I reckon you can't hear it sooner," said Mose, grimly.

"Four of the Invincibles routed out Pepper and his men, killing three at the first fire. In the encounter that followed, five more were wounded, more or less severely, and only one escaped capture!"

For a moment Major Menace seemed deprived of the power of speech.

"Four against ten, and the four victorious!" he muttered at last, in a husky undertone. "They must have fought like devils!"

"So they did, and with charmed lives," averred the Jew. "To-night, Yellow Dust is wild over Little Lightning's League."

"And what of Pepper?" asked Menace, suddenly.

"Killed," was the laconic reply.

"Then the secret of our retreat is safe!" exclaimed the major, with a breath of relief. "Otherwise, I would flee at once to our friends and backers in Utah."

"And leave the harvest ready for the sickle!" Mose ejaculated, sneeringly. "Where's your nerve, major?"

"Well, go on—have your say," cried Menace, in a savage tone. "This affair nettles me, but I'm ready for business."

"That's more like you!" laughed the Jew.

"To resume: Naturally, Orndare was elated over the triumph his forces had achieved, and waxed confidential. Day after to-morrow, according to his statement, the stage from Rocky Bar will bring up the treasure-box of the firm, containing something over fifty thousand dollars!"

"It is a hoax—a bait! He suspects you!" asserted Menace, striking the log a blow by way of emphasis.

"I beg leave to hold a different opinion," said Mose, smilingly. "Ordinarily, my conclusion would be exactly the one you have jumped to; just now, however, the circumstances are such that I can't help believing the fellow spoke the truth."

"He mentioned the fact, too, that the Invincibles would be on hand to protect the coach against road-agents, and that at the first sign of such gentry there would be blood spilt."

"If that crew are to accompany Texas Tom, the treasure shall go through unmolested, so far as I am

concerned," Menace firmly declared. "It would be man against man; and the boys will be disheartened and unnerved when they learn of this Pepper matter, and would be no match for those reckless devils."

"Oh, that's all true enough," cried the Jew, impatiently. "But listen: Assemble your men, and have them encamp somewhere in the bottoms below here. Then, a couple of hours before the hearse is due at the ford, send a picked squad of ten or twelve, well-mounted, down the trail to make a feint at the treasure. A glimpse of them will be all the Invincibles need; they will give pursuit, your men will scatter and draw them on; and the unprotected coach will keep right on to the ford, where you can open fire upon it, just as you have heretofore."

"The plan certainly seems feasible," Menace admitted, in a reflective tone.

"Not only feasible, but wholly practicable," declared the Jew. "But the nub to the entire thing is yet to come."

"Let the men believe the extent of the haul to be twenty-five thousand dollars—the amount of the ransom demanded. Then have the box carried to the treasure-chamber and deposited unopened, where we can remove the surplus at our leisure, with none of them the wiser."

"What say?"

"I'll do it!" avowed the major, springing to his feet. "But are you sure that it will contain the amount you have mentioned?"

"It will be more rather than less," was the reassuring reply.

After a moment of less important talk, the evil pair separated, the Jew returning to Yellow Dust while Menace slowly retraced his steps to the canoe.

Con was awaiting his return, paddle in hand. As soon as his chief had taken his place in the boat, the outlaw pushed off, turning down-stream when he had gained the middle of the western current.

The canoe dragged and at times hung back sluggishly—a fact unnoticed by either of the outlaws, so preoccupied were they with the Jew's startling disclosures. A single glance over the stern of the boat would have revealed the nature of the incubus.

Clinging to the craft with both hands, his bowie between his teeth, his face white and grim, was Saul, the young Hercules.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN INTERRUPTED REPRISAL.

No sooner were the major and Mose Baumschell out of the way than Old Bolly Darrit was rejoined by Kent Kane, the two then taking their way to the bank of the creek in search of Saul.

The lad was not to be found, and after a hasty consultation Kent returned to the horses, leaving Bolly at the ford.

The footsteps of the retreating ranger had hardly died away, when there arose the commotion occasioned by Major Menace's interruption of the canoe containing Mabel Vane and the escaping captives—a commotion that startled the veteran detective, and brought Kent hurrying back to the ford.

"Easy, lad," warned Darrit, grasping the arm of the excited and agitated ranger. "That's the ther gals, I know, jest so well es ye do; but w'at ye goin' ter do? We cain't reach 'em, an' we'll hev ter run up that Menace hes beat us on this tack—barrin' quick work by Saul an' Davy!"

Uttering a groan of dismay, Kent crowded at the edge of the water, peering anxiously down-stream. All was a blank, black waste.

"We can do nothing," he admitted, in husky tones, as he gained his feet. "All is over, down there, and unless Dave and Saul were on hand the girls are worse-off than before."

"Prezackly! And ef our friends have failed, it'd a bin better ef they hedn't 'a' tackled Menace a tall!" averred Bolly, grimly. "They've showed our hands, mebbe, an' done nothin'!"

With that, they became silent and crouched down on the bank to await developments as patiently as possible. To Kent, the uncertainty and enforced inactivity were bitter and galling.

In due course, the sound of a paddle came to them through the darkness, warning them of the approach of a canoe, and after a moment of suspense the boat touched the bend and Little Lightning sprang ashore.

He was instantly joined by Bolly and Kent.

"They slipped ye, Davy?" queried the detective, peering hard at the colorless face of the ranger.

"Yes. Help me ashore with Saul," was the hoarse response. "He's hard hit, and it'll take sharp work to bring him around."

"Don't put yourselves ter any trouble on my account, pards—don't!" came a voice from the canoe, and the next instant the young Hercules arose to a sitting posture. "But, I say, Bolly, ef ye've sumthin' warm in yer pocket, ye may jest trot it for'ard!"

The request was no sooner made than granted, and the trio were immeasurably relieved when Saul stepped ashore apparently little the worse for his adventure.

After a long pull at the detective's flask, the Hercules hastily pulled on his boots, resumed his coat, cap, and belt, and took up his weapons.

"Which way, pards?" he asked.

"To the Lode," replied Bolly, quickly.

"I don't like to leave the island, just yet," Little Lightning observed.

"Bolly's idea is the right one," averred Kent. "It is not at all likely that we could do anything more to-night. Then, too, Saul is as wet as a rat and needs a chance at a fire. We'd better put out for the Lode, and take a fresh start in the morning."

"That's it," Bolly declared. "The fact is, Davy

we've jest heerd a long confab 'twixt Menace an' Mose Baumschell, the Jew, an' I kalkilate we're in a mighty fair way ter git ther under holt—ef we don't crowd our game too hard."

"Then to the Lode be it," said Little Lightning, quickly "Where's your horse, Bolly?"

"Up ther trail. Git yer critters out—I'll hoof it till I come up with mine."

In utter silence, the four friends drew the canoe out of the water and concealed it, then set forward, riding slowly and cautiously until a half-mile from the ford. Then, at the suggestion of Little Lightning, they quit the trail, taking a "short cut" through the hills in the direction of the Lode.

The trip was accomplished without adventure. At the Lode, Orthodox Pete was found on guard, and the horses were promptly given into his charge, while the three young rangers hurried silently into the cabin.

Bolly remained with his veteran pard.

When the horses had been corralled, the two detectives returned to the sentry's post a few paces from the cabin door, filled their pipes, and sat down to compare notes.

An hour passed, almost unnoticed. Then it grew lighter in the east, and the darkness gave place to the dim gray light of early dawn.

The detectives had been silent some minutes, when Pete started and touched Bolly's arm.

"Don't move, pardner—we're watched!" he answered, in a hoarse whisper. "By heavens! we're completely hemmed in!"

"An' kivered, too!" supplemented Darrit without the quiver of a muscle. "Ther Brotherhood hev stole a march on us!"

"W'at're we goin' ter do?"

"I give it up, pard! Ef we sit still, we'll be shot; ef we make a break fer ther cabin, we'll be rid-dled!"

"Most assuredly, my dear sir," interpolated a wheezy voice, just at that juncture, and forth from the cover afforded by a neighboring boulder strode a short, thickset fellow, masked and bearded, and with revolvers drawn. "I must request you to elevate your hands and remain perfectly quiet."

"Oh! ah! indeed!" ejaculated Orthodox. "This is sudden, an' in ther nater ov a s'prise, too!"

"A painful surprise!" echoed Darrit. "I say, is that you, Gideon!"

"I reckon it's Gideon," readily affirmed the outlaw, his blue eyes flashing through the apertures in his mask. "You fellows haven't forgotten me, eh?"

"Not much—that is, ef ye're Gideon Grim w'at was at one time not so long ago ther May'r ov Yaller Dust," Bolly declared. "Be ye thet onhanged Mormon reptilia?"

"I'm that same Gideon Grim, ex-Mayor of Yellow Dust. But enough! Hands up, gentlemen, or you'll lose your last chance of life! We've trifled enough!"

"An' enough's es good es a feast," quoth Bolly, as he obeyed the savage command. "Ye've quite captivated us, me noble may'r that was. But go easy—that's a prime young hornets' nest right in ther shanty there, jest a-waitin' ter swat ye a few! Ye da'sn't!"

"Shut up!" sternly iterated Grim, advancing. "The hornets' nest, will be attended to in due time. Now, steady—both of you!"

"Thar! I knowed it hed ter come!" Bolly ejaculated, with a swift, sidelong glance at the cabin door.

"Ef he'd only 'a' kept still!" uttered Orthodox, in the same breath, with a jubilant ring in his low tones.

The outlaw, startled, thrown off his guard, twisted his neck to obtain a fleeting glance at the door; and that lapse of vigilance, though so brief as to be hardly noticeable, decided the encounter.

Like twin flashes of light, the detectives sprung forward, dashing the revolvers from his hands and hurling themselves upon him ere he could utter more than an inarticulate cry.

The lurking members of the Brotherhood dared not fire. To a man they left their coverts and darted forward, vowing vengeance against the wily old sleuth-hounds.

But Bolly and Orthodox were not idle. No sooner had they disarmed the luckless Grim than they started with him in a zig-zag line toward the doorway of the cabin, swerving to and fro, twisting and whirling about, as if in the throes of a desperate struggle, and thus preventing anything like accurate aim on the part of their foes.

Straight toward the open door rushed the outlaws, and the space between them and the detectives decreased ominously. Then, at the very instant the defeat of Bolly and Orthodox seemed assured, the scales turned.

A wild cheer rung out, and forth from the cabin darted a half-dozen of the Invincibles, revolvers in hand.

A panic seized the outlaws. The dashing, reckless clan seemed to strike terror to their very souls. Turning, they beat a precipitate retreat to the cover they had so valiantly vacated.

A mocking laugh followed them. Not a shot was fired.

At a word from Bolly, the young rangers glided back into the cabin. Then, at the last moment, Gideon Grim slipped away from his captors and darted around the corner of the house.

"Good enough!" exclaimed Orthodox, as he closed the door. "A miss is es good es a mile!"

"Boyees, keep yer eyes peeled fer ther varlets; but don't puncture any ov 'em, 'less ye hev to. Eh, Bolly?"

"No, fer we'll need 'em later on," said Darrit, with a chuckle. "Jest stand 'em off—they'll go

away by an' by. Old Gid hev bin a-schemin' ter squar' up fer Pepper an' his gang. He'll git tired arter awhile—ef he ain't tired now!"

Meanwhile Gideon Grim had succeeded in rejoining his outlaw companions. Not only was he crestfallen, but he also marveled at his escape, which he finally attributed to accident.

"They never let me slip purposely," he decided, after a brief consultation with two or three of his men. "If you fellows had drilled a few holes into those detectives right at the beginning of the muss, we'd 'a' cleaned the gang out, and no trouble at all."

"Oh, yes!" sneered one: "but after you'd captured 'em an' started toward the house, we c'u'dn't tell t'other from which. An' es fer cleanin' out the gang, that's easier talked about than done—specially when they're up an' ready. Eh, pard?"

"That's w'ot!" asseverated the others within hearing.

Grim removed his mask and vigorously mopped his brow.

"Well, gentlemen," he exclaimed, in sheer desperation, "what're you going to do about it?"

"Starve 'em out," suggested one.

"Burn ther cabin, an' pick 'em off es they come out," cried another. "We've got ter wipe 'em out or take jest sick medicine ourselves!"

"And the quicker it's over with, the better," added Grim. "The question is, how shall we fire the cabin?"

At that juncture, the group were startled by footsteps directly behind them, and the next moment Captain Jasen Marks confronted them.

"Boys, you'll have to defer your proposed operations," quoth the redoubtable outlaw, quietly. "I came directly from our chief, and you are to go with me at once."

"Grim, signal the men to retreat to their horses. In due time they shall pay their respects to the Invincibles, but for the time being the matter must rest."

With a muttered curse, the ex-Mayor of Yellow Dust obeyed the command.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TREASURE-CHEST.

TEXAS TOM, the driver of the stage between Rocky Bar and Yellow Dust, was highly elated.

Two or three trips had been made without the slightest molestation, and the Jehu unhesitatingly gave it as his opinion that the horde of outlaws infesting the trail had either grown disgusted and quitted the vicinity, or were lying in wait for a heavy haul.

"They've crowded their game too hard," he asserted, one night in the bar-room of the St. George Hotel. "When a thing ov that kind happens, ther bizness ov ther line falls off, an' then ther durned sharks hev eyther got ter hunt fresh water, or else hold back an' lay fer a chaintce et a ten-strike. An' es ten-strokes aire es scarce es hens' teeth on this hyar leetle line, I opines that ther galoots hev sloped!"

The next morning, just before sunrise, the "hearse" rolled out of Yellow Dust, with Tom in his accustomed place, pulling away at his long crroot.

At a point about two miles below the camp, a slight form suddenly stepped out from the undergrowth just ahead of the stage, with the hail:

"Hold up, Tom—I'm going with you to-day!"

"Baumschell! by ther Rockies!" ejaculated the driver, in an undertone, as he drew the reins sharply. Then, aloud:

"All right, Mose! Jump aboard lively—I'm anxious fer a quick, clean run to-day."

"But whar ye bin so 'arly? What's—"

"Out for a constitutional," interrupted the Jew, crisply. "Take it every morning I find time. Here—have a good cigar."

"That's me—every time," Tom returned, touching up his leaders.

"Mebbe you'd like to moisten your throat—"

"Nary time! Thar's a time fer drink an' a time fer play. When this huss is back in Yellow Dust, I'm foot-loose till mornin'. Jest now, I belong ter ther company. No rye, pard!"

"As you will," and the Jew shoved the half-drawn flask back into his pocket. "Look for any trouble to-day?"

"Mebbe—an' mebbe not."

"That isn't very satisfactory. I thought of fetchin' up a few hundreds from ther Bar, if—"

"Keep a still tongue, an' suit yerself!" was the pointed interruption, and as the Jew caught a swift, sidelong glance from the Jehu's gray eyes his face grew livid.

That glance betrayed suspicion.

"See here, Texas Tom," he exclaimed, in a tone of forced carelessness; "you're walking on stilts this morning. Now, that'll do very well with me, but with some men I might name it wouldn't do at all. Just remember that!"

The Jehu uttered a contemptuous little laugh. Taking the cigar he had accepted a moment before, he coolly snapped it in two and flung away the pieces.

Baumschell noted the action, and his blue eyes glittered wickedly.

"What d'ye mean by that?" he demanded, angrily, half-turning in the seat. "D'ye know you've grossly insulted me?"

"Wal, I wouldn't wonder," drawled the cool Texan, carelessly knocking the ashes from his crroot. "Ther fact is, Moses, ye've bin a Jonah ter ther huss every trip ye've made lately. This is ther last time ye'll go down with me—mind that!"

I'm deuced tired ov bein' held up on your account!"

"Oh! is that all? Well—"

"Stop yer music—I'm tired!" sternly interrupted Tom, deftly gathering the ribbons in his left hand and shoving the muzzle of a revolver almost against the face of the Jew. "Ye want ter kno' too much!"

"Put up your gun, and let that settle it!" cried Baumschell, shrinking back white-faced and trembling. "It wasn't my intention to offend you."

"No, I reckon not!"

"Upon my honor!"

"Yer honor? Hoo!" and the Jehu broke into a grating, ironical laugh, then slowly returned his revolver to his belt. "Cowards hev very leetle honor—it's all fear ov quinsequences with them!"

That ended the conversation; but as the stage approached the ford a half-hour later the Jew became restless and nervous—symptoms that did not escape the keen-eyed Texan.

Just as the leaders plunged into the water, a closely-folded sheet of paper was slyly thrown off to the side of the trail by the spy.

Tom instantly detected the act. In a trice the lines were twisted around the iron railing surmounting the stage, and then he turned upon the Jew with the fury of a tiger.

Baumschell, warned by the actions of the Jehu, had sprung to his feet, and was fumbling with his belt, trying desperately to draw a weapon.

The Jew had long borne the reputation of being a decidedly "bad man" in an encounter of this sort; but he had a wholesome fear of the Texan, and just now he was so nervous and confused that his hand, for the moment forgot its cunning.

To this latter fact Texas Tom undoubtedly owed his life.

With a terrible smile upon his lips, his clear gray eyes glowing like coals, he flung himself upon the treacherous Jew, and then ensued a struggle that baffles description.

The stage had entered the ford, and in its unguided passage over the rocks was swaying madly to and fro, with a fair prospect of upsetting at any moment. The Jew succeeded in drawing a revolver, only to have it stricken from his hand by his wary antagonist. Then, as they clinched, a sudden lurch of the coach pitched them both from the box to the railed top of the vehicle, and wrenching them apart.

The agile Texan was the first to gain his feet. With a growl not unlike that of a maddened lion, he sprung upon the half-prostrate spy, seized and whirled him aloft in his sinewy arms.

"You spy—you treacherous hound!" he grated, bracing his feet for a mighty effort, and in his wrath almost striking the breath from the body of the Jew. "Yer work is done on this trail—go!"

As he uttered the last word, the enraged Jehu hurled the spy from him with all his strength, then, to save himself from going overboard, dropped inertly upon the roof of the wildly rocking stage.

With a terrified shriek, the Jew shot outward and downward, striking the water headfirst just below the rocks, and instantly sunk out of sight.

"Et's nothin' wuss'n a duckin', I'm afraid!" muttered Texas Tom, as he peered down from the top of the coach. "Ef he'd 'a' struck three feet furder this way—" A shudder completed the sentence.

Quickly descending into the box, Tom seized the ribbons, just as the ford was cleared. His long whip cracked spitefully, the burros broke into a swift trot, and the scene of his desperate adventure was soon left far in the rear.

The remainder of the down-trip was accomplished without adventure, and shortly after twelve o'clock the stage rolled out of Rocky Bar on its return to Yellow Dust.

As on the down-trip, it carried no passengers; but reposing snugly upon the backs of the seats was a long wooden box—"a box big enough an' strong enough fer a fu'st class coffin," as Tom had described it, and bearing across its top the words:

"ORNDARE & CARSON,

"Yellow Dust, Nev."

It certainly was a substantial chest, although its top and sides were profusely and fancifully perforated.

It was of oak, iron-bound, and provided with a solid-looking lock.

This box had become a familiar object to Tom. It was the treasure-chest of the firm whose name it bore, and he had frequently carried it to and from Rocky Bar.

The old coach bowled along without interruption until the afternoon was fully half gone. Then, just as it entered a shadowy defile known along the trail as Half-Way Pass, a man suddenly stepped into view with a signal to the Jehu to pull up.

"Thet's Little Lightning, an' now ther band'll begin ter play!" muttered the driver, instantly checking his horses. "Aire ye ready, Davy?"

"Yes; toss me the key, Tom, and I'll get inside the coach," replied the young ranger, advancing. "The trail all clear below?"

"Puffectly; not a sign ov a road-agent. Had ter throw Baumschell overboard at the ford this mornin', though," the Texan returned, as he handed down the key of the coach. "Aire ther boys on hand?"

"Just at the other end of the pass."

Entering the coach, the ranger locked the door and handed the key up to the driver, and then quietly seated himself.

At the upper end of the pass, eleven horsemen rode out of the timber, and silently fell in "by twos" directly behind the stage, headed by Old Bolly Darrit and Kent Kane, with Orthodox Pete bringing up the rear.

These silent riders were the Prairie Invincibles—Little Lightning's League.

Two or three miles were covered with scarcely a

word to break the silence; then, with startling suddenness, the report of Texas Tom's whip rung out twice in as many seconds.

"Right and left, boys, and form in front," cried Kent, in a low, penetrating tone, and with the words the column parted, half sweeping one way, and half the other, around the stage, to form in solid lines across the trail.

In the open timber, scarcely a hundred yards distant, were twelve or fifteen masked men, mounted, and spurring directly toward the stage.

At sight of the League, however, the masked riders suddenly halted, then wheeled and dashed away in full retreat.

"Ready—aim—fire!" shouted Kent, and in response to the command the ready rifles of the League cracked almost as one. When the smoke lifted, it could be seen that two or three saddles had been emptied by the volley, while the panic-stricken road-agents were fleeing in every direction.

"After 'em, pard!" roared old Bolly Darrit, driving home his spurs. "Give 'em Hail Columbia an'—remember Bobby Lyon!"

That was enough. With an outburst of fierce shouts the band dashed forward in hot pursuit, quickly passing from the view of Texas Tom.

Little Lightning had been an interested spectator, and as he noted the headlong flight of the Brotherhood, he smiled grimly and muttered:

"That volley was a little more than they had figured on! Bolly was right—we are getting the whip hand."

But let us follow the Invincibles. After the wild outburst with which the pursuit was inaugurated naught was heard but the swift rush of the horses through the open woodland, and the occasional crack of a rifle, for upward of fifteen or twenty minutes, when Kent sounded the recall—a clear, sharp whistle.

At that time not an outlaw was to be seen, but as the way was becoming choked with undergrowth and young timber, it was almost a certainty that they were not far in advance, and further pursuit would be at the imminent risk of ambush.

As soon as the last lad of the League had fallen into line, Bolly and Kent slowly led the way toward the distant trail, walking their horses and maintaining strict silence.

In due time they arrived at the ford, without having sighted the stage. After a brief consultation, they crossed the stream and pushed toward Yellow Dust.

A half-mile beyond the ford Kent dismounted and picked up a piece of bark lying in the middle of the trail. On the under side, printed in red chalk, were the letters:

"O. K."

"That means business," observed the ranger, handing the bark to Darrit. "It's from Tom. We must find some place to leave the horses, and make all haste to the island."

"You're right," Darrit assented. "No great need to take them critters far—two or three hundred yards off the trail'll do."

Nodding, Kent remounted and led the way to a grassy dingle off to the right a short distance, where all dismounted. When the horses had been picketed, two lads who had been slightly wounded during the skirmish were detailed as sentries, and then the party hastened back to the creek, using every precaution to keep under cover.

By the time they had reached the vicinity of the ford night was near at hand; but, after consulting Bolly, Kent decided to cross at once to the island, and the canoe was accordingly brought from its place of concealment and launched.

So, in due course, the Invincibles found themselves upon the island. The canoe was carefully hidden, and then the party proceeded to the heights surrounding the basin, where they halted to await developments.

An hour or so after nightfall Bolly and old Dan Rackhoss made a thorough reconnaissance of the island, and on their return reported everything quiet, with not a trace of the outlaws.

"They are somewhere about this island," affirmed Kent, doggedly, "and here I'm going to stay till I know the secret of their haunt."

"Well, they can't stay holed-up long at a stretch," Bolly sagely observed, and then he proceeded to make himself as comfortable as possible.

His example was speedily followed by the others. Even Kent, who was burning with impatience and anxiety, finally sought his blanket.

For hours not a sound marred the intense silence brooding over the island. The night was clear and cool, without a breath of wind, and the dark waters on either side swept by without a ripple or a murmur.

Then, all at once, there came a confused murmuring, a ringing clash, as of steel against steel—faint and subdued, yet near at hand, and in an instant every member of the League was alert and wide awake.

A moment of painful suspense ensued. Then an agonized cry, muffled and indistinct, rung out, and Bolly Darrit sprung to his feet, his eyes aglow with excitement.

"Pards, we've found 'em!" he exclaimed, in a hoarse, chuckling whisper. "Kent was right—this island is their lair, and we've solved the secret!"

"But—Davy!" ejaculated Kent, weakly.

Darrit started, and his ruddy visage turned white.

"By heavens! I fear he is lost!" he groaned. Then:

"Saul Scott, take two of the boys, get the canoe, and go around to the mouth of that basin. We've got to force our way into that den, by land or by water!"

No response followed.

A hasty canvass disclosed the fact that the young Hercules was missing!

CHAPTER XV.

DOLORES PROPOSES A PLAN.

AFTER her ill-starred attempt to liberate Millie and Rachel, Mabel Vane was thrust into the gloomy chamber of the captives, and a sentry posted day and night at the lower end of the corridor.

Toward the close of the second day of this close confinement, however, to the intense surprise of the captive girls the bearskin covering the entrance to the chamber was stealthily lifted, and Dolores appeared.

"Hist!" she warned, lifting her hand as the three girls started to their feet. "Not a sound, or you may betray me! The guard is near at hand!"

Then, as the heavy curtain descended, the outlaw's wife glided toward the center of the chamber, saying in a subdued voice:

"They are all away but the guard, and I succeeded in eluding him; but we must be extremely careful, for he has keen ears and an incautious word would spoil all."

"You may trust us, my dear Dolores," returned Mabel, reassuringly, as she seized the woman's hands. "You come with news?"

"Dios! yes—and bad news!" was the hasty reply. "To-day the Brotherhood will capture the money with which the fathers of these young ladies intended to ransom them. Wait—don't get excited, or faint, my dears; there's worse to tell you, and after that a plan to escape."

"Go on," urged Rachel, speaking with an effort.

"Well, to be brief, the situation is just this: The Kane brothers and their young friends seem to have obtained an inkling as to the location of this rendezvous, and the Brotherhood has become alarmed and toward morning will quit this place, to cross the line into Utah, where the major has influential friends."

"What will they do with us?" faltered Millie, her face blanched.

"I was about to speak of that," said Dolores, simply. "But before I proceed, there is a word I wish to say concerning myself."

"When I consented to aid my husband in this affair, it was upon the distinct understanding that neither of you should suffer any indignity or harm beyond being abducted and detained until the ransom money could be paid, whereupon you were to be returned to your friends. Within the past forty-eight hours, however, I have learned that I was grossly deceived as to his real purpose, and it is now my mission to undo so far as possible the work I have been instrumental in doing."

"You, Mabel, are to be forced into marrying Captain Marks."

"You, Rachel, and you, Millie, are to be carried into Utah, to become the wives of certain polygamous bishops—men high in the affairs of the Mormon Church, wealthy and unscrupulous!"

"These Saints have been the prime movers in this miserable affair—furnishing the men and the money necessary to carry out the nefarious scheme. My husband has been a willing tool in their hands, out of motives revengeful as well as mercenary. You will remember that his father, Bishop Hearne, was secretly a Mormon dignitary, and that through the abduction of Millie there, only a few months ago, he came to his death."

"We remember only too well," said Rachel, with a shudder. "But for David and Kent—"

"They were the object of my husband's revenge fully as much as were your fathers," interrupted Dolores hurriedly. "The major's wickedness appalls me! He must be thwarted—you three must escape! and covering her face with her hands, the woman sobbed convulsively.

Despite her passionate, unquestioning devotion, she was beginning to see Major Manuel Menace in his true colors—to realize the enormity of the deed she had blindly helped to commit.

A moment, and then she lifted her head. Her tears were gone, and in their stead was an angry sparkle. On her ashen lips was a bitter smile.

"Come!" she exclaimed, almost sharply, as she noted the puzzled glances of the three girls. "You must get away from here—you must dig your way out! I have brought you the knives!"

"But where?" ventured Mabel, with a dismayed look at the stone walls.

"There is a weak spot," Dolores returned. "I have heard the men speak of it. Here—this way," and she glided toward the gloomiest recess of the chamber.

Her assertion proved true. The nook was about three feet wide and probably four in height. The end and the arch overhead were of earth.

"You can tunnel through there in a few hours," declared Dolores, after a brief examination. "The knives are bowies—long, sharp and strong—regular trail-cutters. Slant the hole upward, but not too much. Spread something on the floor for the earth to fall in, so that you can carry it away and dump it in the out-of-the-way corners. After I have brought your suppers, leave as soon as possible. When you get outside, turn to the left and keep on till you come to the creek. Wait there until I come with a canoe."

The captives listened attentively to the rapidly-spoken words, and as Dolores ended she handed each a knife, cutting short their thanks with an imperious gesture.

"There is one thing I shall have to ask," she said, turning back as she was about to leave the chamber. "Promise me that in the event of your escaping you will not disclose the whereabouts of this cavern until my husband has had time to escape."

"I so promise," responded Mabel, and her com-

panions unhesitatingly joined her in the pledge, whereupon Dolores stealthily quitted the chamber. The girls quickly formed their plans. As but one could work in the narrow nook, it was decided that while one dug, another should carry away the dirt, and the third guard again surprise.

A blanket was then spread in the recess, and Mabel began operations with her knife. The earth was hard, and the work progressed slowly. By the supper hour, each had taken a turn, and they were not more than a foot nearer the surface.

When Dolores heard this, her face clouded.

"That is not as well as I could have wished," she observed, reflectively. "But persevere—the nearer the surface you get, the softer the earth will become."

As soon as they had disposed of supper, the captives resumed their task, Mabel, as before, taking the initiative.

But the tunnel lengthened slowly—so slowly, in fact, that by the time three feet of it had been completed the girls were exhausted.

"It must be near midnight," observed Millie, wearily. "If it were only completed!"

"We are nearer through than you suspect," Mabel averred, turning toward the recess.

"Yes, we are near the surface," said Rachel, hopefully; "the earth is becoming not only loose and porous, but darker—a certain indication that the end is near."

"Well, it can't be too near," grimly declared Mabel. "It is high time—"

A peculiar sound interrupted the girl. A faint, rumbling sound, as of sliding or falling earth, and then a succession of heavy bumps.

"The tunnel has caved in!" ejaculated Millie, catching up and holding aloft a brand from the fire.

"Exactly! an' thanks fer ther light, gals!" came a voice from the recess, and the next instant, a tall form, covered with clinging particles of earth, stepped into view.

Mabel started, and uttered a cry of joy.

The intruder was none other than Saul Scott, the young Hercules.

CHAPTER XVI.

MENACE SURPRISED.

It was with no little satisfaction that Texas Tom, the Jehu, witnessed the defeat of the Brotherhood at the hands of Little Lightning's League, and no sooner was the trail clear than he whipped up and drove rapidly in the direction of Yellow Dust.

In a secluded spot a half-mile east of the ford, he stopped the stage, descended, and opened one of the doors.

"Pard, we is gettin' nigh the ticklish p'int," he announced. "Et's a resky game, Better guv et up an' try sum other way."

"No. Every foot of ground about the island has been covered, and every other expedient resorted to, and the mystery remains unsolved."

"Drive on, Tom, and if all goes well leave the mark in the trail beyond the ford."

The Texan seemed nonplussed.

"I wishes I cu'd argie ye out ov et, pard!" he exclaimed, lifting his hat and running his fingers through his long hair. "But ef ye will go, good luck to ye! Do ther best ye know how. Shake, Davy!"

Their hands met in a warm clasp; then the door closed, the key clicked in the lock, the Jehu clambered back into his perch, and the stage rolled on toward the ford.

Just as the leaders were entering the water the expected hail rang out:

"Halt, Texas Tom, and throw up your hands!"

The demand met with a ready compliance, and then out from the rocks south of the trail came four men, all masked, and each with a revolver in hand.

"Don't try any crooked business, Texas, or out goes your light!" sternly warned the foremost.

"Ye don't see me foolin' any, Cap," growled the Jehu. "Ef them pesky kids war whar they'd orter be, I'd sing ye a song, though!"

"They're a bright lot!" the road-agent sneered, as he tried the stage door. "Hello!—locked! That's a new wrinkle on this line!"

"Throw us the key, driver!"

"Oh, sart'ly! Anything else I kin do fer ye?"

Ignoring the snarling query, the outlaw opened the door and sprang inside.

Save the treasure-chest, there was nothing in the stage. Little Lightning had disappeared.

As the road-agent noted the address on the box, his eyes sparkled greedily.

"It's the genuine article!" he exclaimed, lifting one end. "Here, give us a little help, one of you fellows. From the weight of this chest, Carson and Orndare must be shipping a lead mine!"

Two of the men sprang forward, and the box was lifted out and carried to the side of the trail, each movement being accompanied with a musical clinking.

Then the road-agent chief locked the coach-door and politely returned the key to the driver, saying:

"Whip up, Texas Tom—push on the ribbons, and adieu till another day!"

With a muttered imprecation, the Jehu obeyed the mocking command, urging the horses into the ford and plying his whip relentlessly on gaining the opposite shore.

"He takes it hardly, to-day," laughed the chief, turning to the box as soon as the hearse was out of sight. "Losing the treasure will cost him his situation."

"But lay hold—we must get away with our booty. That devil's cohort, the Invincibles, may sweep down upon us at any moment."

"Ho! Tybo, you and Vane lend a hand."

The two men addressed at once advanced from the shelter of the rocks, each armed with a repeating-rifle.

Laying their guns upon the lid, the six road-agents carefully lifted the chest and carried it back from the trail to a small willow inlet, where three canoes lay moored at the edge of a flat, shelving rock.

Across one of these boats a platform had been built, and upon it the treasure-box was carefully placed.

The chief then gave the word, and the foremost boat moved out into the creek with the treasure in tow.

The chief and two men kept a short distance in the rear, permitting their craft to drift with the current and keeping the ford under close surveillance.

Arrived in the cavern, the party disembarked, and the chest was at once conveyed to the treasure-chamber.

"It will be opened to-night, boys, in the presence of the entire band," announced the chief, removing his mask and disclosing the grisly face of Major Menace. "Go, now, and make your preparations to depart. The treasure will be apportioned among you shortly before we evacuate this cavern."

A moment later the chamber was deserted.

No sooner had the footsteps of the retreating road-agent died away than a faint clicking sound broke the silence. Then the lid of the treasure-box was cautiously raised, and a little form scrambled out.

Instead of gold and silver, the coveted chest had contained a man; and that man was the dauntless Little Lightning!

Closing the chest, Little Lightning made a careful survey of the chamber, aided by the dull gray light from a half-dozen rifts overhead.

It was evident, even in the darkness, that the place was little used. It contained a few boxes and parcels, and over all was a damp, musty odor.

"A miserable hole—a fit place for a thieves' den!" muttered the ranger. "Heavens! if Rachel and Millie are shut up in a place like this, death would be a welcome release to them!"

"But if they have suffered, their wrongs shall not go unavenged! If I live, just and due punishment shall be meted out to Menace and his men!"

"Now to find the outlet to this hole. If anything is to be gained by this venture, I must find my way out and rejoin the Invincibles at the earliest possible moment. Then—"

Little Lightning's teeth came together with a sharp click, and into his black eyes crept a dangerous glitter.

Groping across the narrow chamber, he followed the wall until he came to a stout wooden door, which, he speedily discovered, was secured with a heavy lock.

"I can't get through that," he decided, after a brief examination of the barrier. "I may as well sit down and await the coming of the head devil of the gang. As he and the Jew were to have the first whack at the chest, I may expect them as soon after nightfall as they can elude their companions in villainy."

Returning to the chest, the ranger sat down and made himself as comfortable as possible, to await patiently the coming of Major Menace.

After what seemed ages, though in reality but four or five hours, a key clicked in the lock, and with a faint creaking the door swung open.

Leaving the chest, Little Lightning glided behind a pile of boxes a few paces distant.

The spy had scarcely changed his position when a match crackled sharply, and the stealthy intruder lighted a lantern.

As Little Lightning had suspected, the fellow was Major Menace.

Locking the door and slipping the key into his pocket, the outlaw chief at once advanced to the captured treasure-chest, lantern in hand.

This mode of proceeding compelled Little Lightning to amend his plans slightly.

Just as Menace placed his lantern on the stone floor and produced a bunch of skeleton keys, he was startled by a light touch upon the shoulder.

Turning, he found the muzzle of a revolver staring him straight in the face.

"Little Lightning!" he ejaculated, his natural pallor deepening, his hand seeking the weapons in his belt.

"Exactly, major—Little Lightning, one of the men you have so bitterly wronged!" was the cold, even-toned response. "Don't try to draw—it's death to you."

"Hold up your hands!"

Utterly cowed, the road-agent chief obeyed. There was something in the stern, white face of the ranger that for the moment struck terror to his very soul.

"Where are your captives—Millie Orndare and Rachel Carson?"

The question was ill-timed. It recalled to Menace his senses. The full significance of his position dawned upon him, and a fiery sparkle appeared in his dark-blue eyes. A brief struggle, and he was himself again—as cool, daring and iron-nerved as ever!

"And what if I refuse to say?" he demanded, quietly.

"Then I shall kill you and find out later on," calmly replied Little Lightning. "I am not here to waste words. Answer, or—"

How it was done, neither could have told. The road-agent chief, nerved to desperation, hazarded all on one bold stroke, bewildering in its swiftness. Little Lightning's revolver rattled to the floor, and the two were face to face, neither with a weapon in hand.

"We're man to man!" grated Menace, recoiling a

trifle, and whipping out his bowie, a move in which he was disconcerted by Little Lightning. "Are you ready?"

"Ready!" was the laconic response, and the next instant the ten-inch blades met with a crash.

Then the ranger realized that he had his redoubtable adversary at a disadvantage, that he was a novice with the weapon, holding it with his little finger against the guard, his thumb and forefinger around the outer end of the handle.

A pass or so, a few thrusts, and 'hen Little Lightning lunged forward, his arm extended, his blade grasped rapier-fashion, his forefinger and the end of his thumb against the short guard.

Menace uttered an agonized cry, and staggered back, dropping his knife. His right shoulder had been pierced through and through!

Thrusting his bowie into its sheath, Little Lightning picked up his revolver and sprung forward, knocking the disabled outlaw senseless with a blow from the gold-bound butt of the weapon.

Hastily securing the key, the young ranger seized the lantern, approached and unlocked the door, then extinguished the light and hurried out into the wide corridor.

Along this left fork of the corridor Little Lightning made his way for perhaps a hundred feet, moving in almost a semicircle; then it suddenly opened out into a large chamber, near the center of which glowed and crackled a huge fire.

Beyond this fire, and at the foot of a short slope, afloat on a gloomy-looking pool were a number of canoes.

"That's the outlet," the ranger muttered, after a brief scrutiny of the place. "As this part of the den seems deserted for the moment, I'll risk the attempt!" and springing down from the ledge on which he had been standing, he hurried toward the water.

Then out from the shadows bordering the pool darted two men, uttering shouts of alarm.

"A spy! a spy!" cried the foremost, a burly desperado armed with a knife. "Onto him, Jim!"

For just a breath, Little Lightning knew not which way to turn. Then, trusting to fortune, he darted into a narrow, dimly-lighted corridor, hotly pursued by the two outlaws.

The end of the passage was speedily reached. There was no outlet visible. With drawn revolvers, the ranger faced about to await the onset.

At that juncture, a bearskin hanging against the stone wall at his side was thrust away, and a great hand seized his arm.

"Hist! Pard Davy!—this way!" ejaculated a familiar voice, in cautious strains; and wheeling, Little Lightning found himself face to face with Saul Scott, the young Hercules.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ISLAND MYSTERY SOLVED.

The discovery that Saul Scott was missing was a startling one, and Bolly Darrit and his companions were sadly mystified.

But it was no time, just then, for idle conjecture. There was a strong probability that Little Lightning had been detected in the island lair, and was at that moment battling for life against desperate odds.

"Kent," cried Bolly, when it had been established that the Hercules was missing, "take two or three of them boyees an' git ther canoe inter water es soon es ye kin. Beat up an' down ther creek thar till ye find sumthin'—ef it takes till daylight!"

The lads required no urging. No sooner had Kent named his two, than the trio set out in quest of the canoe. Launching the boat on the eastern side of the island, they embarked and were about to paddle down-stream when a sound a short distance above arrested their attention.

"It's Texas Tom, with Orndare and Carson," uttered Kent, with a breath of relief, after a moment of patient listening and watching.

Within a minute or so the canoe containing the mine-owners and the Jebu was alongside that of the young rangers, and after a brief consultation both crews paddled down the stream, keeping close to the island shore.

They had not proceeded far when Kent uttered a word of warning, and the paddles were instantly lifted from the water.

The precaution was a timely one, and well taken. Coming up the stream were three canoes, each containing four or five men.

At a point opposite to the hollow cave, they turned toward the island and silently entered the narrow outlet of the basin.

As soon as the last canoe had disappeared, Kent quickly put one of his companions ashore, with a message for Bolly, then pulled at once into the cliff-bordered basin, determined at whatever hazard to learn the secret of the retreat.

He was just in time.

The canoes had crossed the basin and were in the shadow of the opposite wall, a section of which was just opening out, like a door upon its hinges, and throwing across the water a belt of light.

"Mark the spot, Pat!" exclaimed Kent, in cautious tones. "That's our road, if we have to batter down the door!"

"Begorra, sor! Et's thet same we'll be afther havin' ter do, fer et's divil a glimpse av the kaehole we'll be gittin' this night! We'se lucky, indade!"

A strange sound interrupted the Celt's hurried utterances—shouts, cries, the report of firearms—sounds indicative of a fierce struggle—a strange sound, stifled and indistinct, yet coming from a point not far distant.

"They've discovered Davy!" cried Kent, an indescribable thrill betraying itself in his voice. "Ha! the secret entrance closes! Back, Pat—we must

pick up Bolly and the boys and force our way in—quick! If they've murdered him!"

"Hold! Kent Kane, I've a word for you!" interpolated a low clear voice, and out from the gloom to the left of the rangers darted a canoe, bearing a single occupant.

"By Heaven! it is a woman!" burst from Kent's lips the next instant, as the boats came side to side.

"Yes—Inez Carro, otherwise Dolores Menace!" was the swift response.

"Ha! you, traitress?"

"Yes, I, Kent Kane!" proudly returned the woman. "But this is no place or time for useless remonstration."

"Swear to me that the life of Major Menace shall be spared, and you shall know the secret of the entrance yonder!"

The ranger started.

"And if I refuse?" he asked, after a moment of silence.

"Then you'd better return to Yellow Dust, for your errand will prove worse than useless. John Vane, the man who contrived that gateway of stone, is one of the most skillful artisans known. He worked months upon it, and—Learn the secret—if you can!"

"Hold, woman!"

"Your promise? Not—"

"You have it, Inez Carro!" interrupted a voice, which all recognized as that of James Orndare, the mine-owner. "I have heard all. Now, forward and open the gateway, without the loss of an instant!"

Burning with impatience lest she should be too late to save the life of her rascally husband, Dolores Menace needed little urging. In an incredibly short time, the six men had been piloted through the gateway, and were at last within the cavern.

Beaching their canoes, they silently sprung ashore and hastened up the slope to the level of the chamber, revolvers in hand.

The outlaws of the Brotherhood, as yet unaware of the intrusion, were in a dense group at the lower end of the corridor leading to the chamber in which the captives had been confined.

Their first notification of the turn affairs had taken was the stern command:

"Hands up, gentlemen! The game is played, and you are prisoners at last!"

Had a bomb descended in their midst, the rascally crew could not have been more terribly astonished.

"Boys, they've got us, front and rear! The jig's up!" cried Captain Jason Marks, raising his empty hands.

His example was at once followed by the men.

Then down the corridor came Little Lightning, Saul Scott, Bolly Darrit, and the others of the League, while in the background were to be seen the three girls, Rachel, Millie, and Mabel.

The task of disarming and securing the prisoners was accomplished quietly and effectively, and then it was found that Major Menace was missing.

Just as this discovery was made, a pistol-shot, closely followed by a scream, rung out in a remote part of the cavern.

"That came from the treasure-chamber," averred Little Lightning. "Menace and his wife are there."

The surmise proved correct. On investigating, it was found that the chief of the infamous Brotherhood, regaining consciousness only to find that his stronghold was in the hands of Little Lightning's League, had blown out his brains.

The grief of Dolores was heartrending.

When everything had been made snug and secure for the remainder of the night, the three girls and their gallant lovers, together with James Orndare and Lewis Carson, made their way to the chamber of the late captives, where around a glowing fire they whiled away the hours of darkness with animated conversation.

The only sad one in the party was Mabel Vane. Her father was a criminal and a captive. But a half dozen quickly-spoken sentences from the mine-owners removed the weight of anxiety from the heart of the brave girl, and when morning came John Vane was missing. He afterward became a straightforward citizen of Rocky Bar.

"Saul," exclaimed Kent, during a brief lull in the conversation, "how did you fellows gain the interior of the cavern?"

"Fell in!" laughed the Hercules. "While we were loafing around on the hillside out there, waitin' fur something to turn up, I concluded to scout round a bit on my own hook, and about the next thing I knew, I was right here among the girls. They had been digging their way out, and the tunnel was almost to the surface: I happened to step on the right spot, and down I came."

"I'd just gotten the tunnel cleaned out, when Davy turned up, chased by a pack of outlaws. While he held 'em off, I fetched Bolly and the boys down, and we'd just been a-wipin' it to the Brotherhood when you fellows came in below and stopped the fun."

And the entire party voted the affair a piece of blundering good luck.

The remnant of the once powerful and thoroughly organized Brotherhood of Fortune received just and due punishment, and the remarkable campaign of Little Lightning's League was not soon forgotten by the roughs and toughs of the district.

Dolores Menace disappeared shortly after the death of her husband, and it is thought she made her way into Mexico and entered a convent.

A week after the triumphant return of our friends to Yellow Dust, three marriages were solemnized at the Orndare cottage, and the camp literally "held its breath, an' then went wild!"

THE END.

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